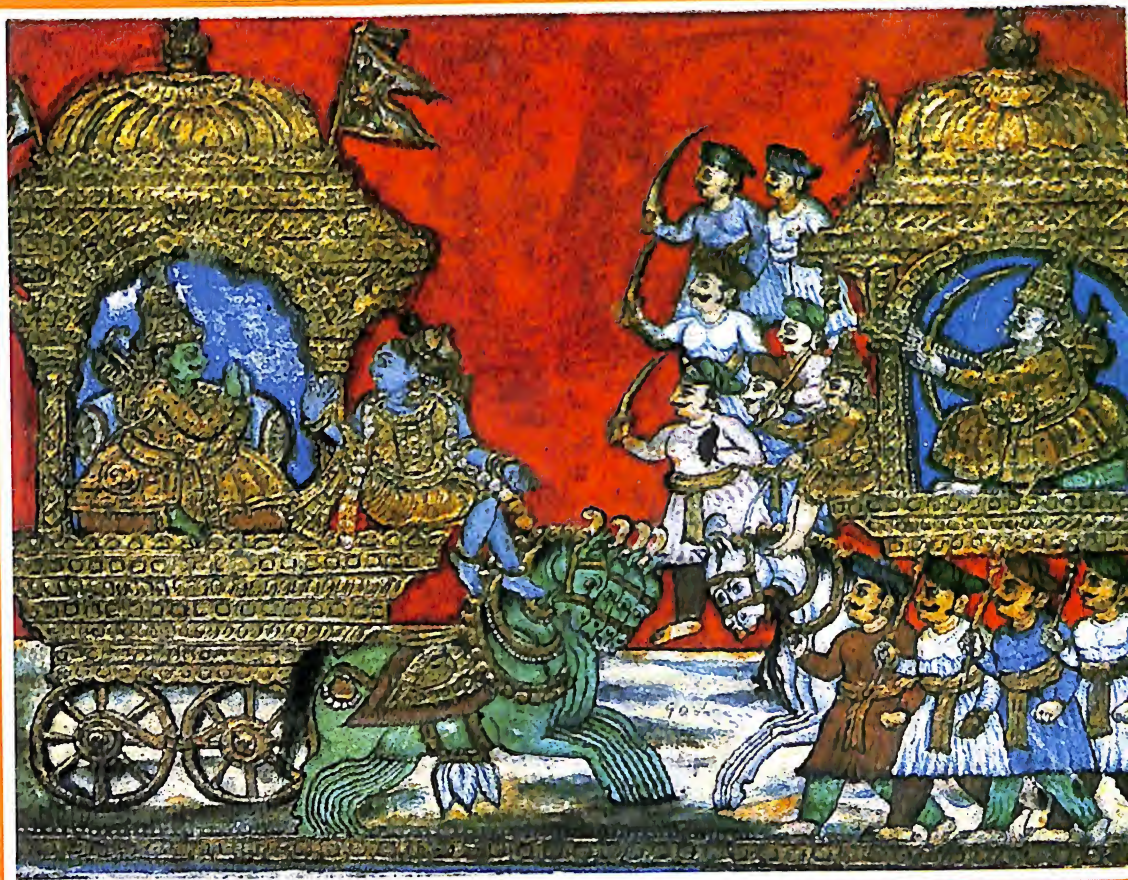# The
Mahābhārata
and the Yugas

India's Great Epic Poem and
the Hindu System of World Ages

Luis González-Reimann

This book questions the conventional wisdom that a fully matured theory of the yugas—Hinduism's ages of the world—is integral to the *Mahābhārata*, and it illustrates how traditional commentators and modern scholars have read the later Purāṇic yuga theory into the *Mahābhārata*, in particular when it comes to placing the action at the beginning of the current terrible Kali Yuga. Luis González-Reimann discusses the meaning of key terms in the epic by examining the text and early Buddhist sources. This book also traces the sectarian appropriation of the yuga system in later literature and documents how modern religious movements have used the system to proclaim the arrival of a new, prosperous Kṛta Yuga, a phenomenon that coincides with New Age expectations.

The Mahābhārata
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for Erik and Ilan

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Preface

For most followers of a religious tradition, as for Tevye, the historical origins of the tradition itself are irrelevant. Its importance lies in its current usefulness. A tradition is significant if, as Tevye suggests, it helps us understand who we are and it charts our moral and social duties. Traditions give life meaning.

It is also important, however, to study how traditions arise, how they take shape and how they are later transformed and recast according to the needs of the times. This is not only relevant as a historical study, it is also useful for understanding the present. Among the many so-called new religious movements of today, for instance, some will, no doubt, be considered as tradition some time in the future.

Just as a better historical understanding of the origins of venerable traditions can help us understand the birth of new ones, the opposite is also true: the current explosion of movements can be instrumental in deepening our understanding of how today's well-established religious traditions arose. In fact, we are perhaps in a unique position to understand the processes by which the major religions gained importance, because they usually emerged during

times of intense social, philosophical and religious questioning, much like what is taking place today.[1] The start of a new millennium adds an additional element by evoking expectations that a new age is beginning as an old one fades away. It was at an equivalent moment in Indian history, more than two thousand years ago, that major transformations spurred on the creation of a significant component of traditional Hinduism: the belief in a system of world ages that, by cosmic design, determine the conditions of life on Earth. The following chapters are an attempt at understanding some aspects of the growth of this tradition.

Notes

The epigraph is from the prologue to the play and film *Fiddler on the Roof*, © 1964 by Joseph Stein, published by Crown Publishers.

[1] In a recent example, Rodney Stark, a sociologist, convincingly uses insights drawn from the dynamics of modern religious movements to support his contention that among early converts to Christianity there were more Jews than is generally acknowledged (Stark [1996] 1997: Chapter 3, *passim*).

Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

I have kept the use of abbreviations to a minimum.
The following are used:

AB   *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*
AV   *Atharva Veda*
B.C.E. Before the Common Era
BhG   *Bhagavad Gītā*
BhP   *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*
CE   Critical Edition
C.E.   Common Era
DBhP   *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*
KP   *Kūrma Purāṇa*
Mbh   *Mahābhārata*
MDhŚ   *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*
MT   *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*
MU   *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*
PP   *Padma Purāṇa*
Rām   *Rāmāyaṇa*
RV   *Ṛg Veda*
VāP   *Vāyu Purāṇa*
VP   *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*
YP   *Yuga Purāṇa*

The word Epic (with a capital E) refers to the *Mahābhārata*.

Introduction

One of the main characteristic features of Hinduism is a complex system of world ages and cycles of creation and destruction. Within this elaborate system, the theory of the yugas has always played a prominent role. It explains why society is as it is, and it describes the best course of action for someone who wants to live according to religious principles. The theory also explains, in mythological terms, important historical transformations in the religious, moral, and social values of the Indian subcontinent.

The system of yugas was formed at a crucial time in the history of India, a long period stretching from approximately the fifth century B.C.E. to the fifth century C.E. In the early part of this period, the dominant brahmanic Vedic tradition was forced to adapt and transform in order to survive. This was a time of profound changes in all spheres: social, political, economic, religious, and philosophical. The challenges that confronted the authoritative religious traditions of the time also gave rise to new ideas that would become powerful new religious traditions in their own right. This period saw the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism, and, somewhat later, the reworked brahmanic religion we know today as Hinduism.

It was probably the need to confront these far-reaching transformations in Indian religious traditions and social conditions that provided a fertile ground for the growth of a theory of world ages. The perceived moral and religious decline of society, and the proliferation of non-brahmanical or anti-brahmanical movements were explained by the arrival of a cosmically-determined

decadent age. It was during this same period that a monumental epic poem was taking shape, a text that would become one of the main cornerstones of Hinduism: the *Mahābhārata*, the 'great epic of India,' a text that, through accretion and interpolation, became a veritable encyclopedia of ideas and beliefs.

The focus of this study is the relationship between these two building blocks of Hinduism, the yuga theory and the *Mahābhārata*. According to received tradition both are inextricably linked, as the events described in the Epic are said to have inaugurated the present, decadent age of Kali.[1] The nature of the tragic confrontation described in the poem, as well as its consequences, are attributed to the influence of the impending dark Kali Yuga. The assumption that the influence of the Kali Yuga is an essential narrative element of the *Mahābhārata* story is also shared by most modern scholars, who then seek to explain different components of the story through the gloomy background imposed on the Epic by the Kali Yuga. In other words, in this view, the poem presupposes the understanding that, at the moment its events took place, the world (or, more properly, Bhārata, India) was at the threshold of its lowest and most negative period in history.

This book challenges such an assumption, and shows that a careful analysis of the relevant Epic passages, as well as of other materials, points to a late superimposition of the yuga theory onto the epic poem. In time, the connection between the two was increasingly reinforced, and a kind of symbiotic relationship developed: the *Mahābhārata* provided the yuga theory with definitive authority, while the yuga theory served to account for the questionable deeds of many of the epic heroes, deeds that would normally be considered below the high moral and religious standards expected of them.

Before going fully into this subject, it is important to provide some general background concerning the Indian system of world ages, as well as a few introductory words about the *Mahābhārata*.[2]

Cyclical Time in Hinduism

An important aspect of Hindu notions of time (as well as those of Buddhism and Jainism) is the perception that everything moves in endlessly recurring cycles. The starting point of these ideas is probably to be found in three fundamental astronomical cycles that were very important in the Vedic period: the day, the lunar month, and the year. These served as models for increasingly larger time cycles that were considered to influence everything on Earth, from plants to human beings, and from human emotions to social and religious institutions and teachings. We could say that this cyclical view of the world finds expression on two levels: the microcosmic level, that is, the cyclical process as it affects the individual; and the macrocosmic level, which deals with the large cycles of social transformation and world creation and destruction.

At the microcosmic level, everyone is subject to a constant rotation in the world of living beings. Life, death and rebirth go on ceaselessly in the wheel of worldly existence, *saṃsāra*. Transmigration affects every living entity, from a plant all the way up to the gods. We all reincarnate, whether upwards or downwards along the scale, according to our actions in our present and past lives. The only way out of the endlessly rotating wheel of time is spiritual liberation, *mokṣa*.[3]

At the macrocosmic level, which is our main concern here, Hinduism recognizes three basic units of cyclical time: the kalpas, the manvantaras, and the yugas. The first of these, the kalpa, is the cycle of world creation and destruction, which came to be considered as a day of the creator god Brahmā. The world is created when Brahmā wakes up and it is destroyed when he falls asleep, just as the world seems to come alive when the Sun arrives at dawn, and to disappear as it sets in the evening.[4] The manvantaras are 'periods of Manu,' that is to say, they are ruled by a particular Manu—a progenitor of the human race—and each manvantara is associated with a group of gods. A new Indra, for instance, is said to be born in each manvantara. Finally, the yugas determine the rise and fall of dharma, understood as the rules of

proper conduct that depend on the social class as well as on the stage in the life of the individual.[5] There are four yugas, and respect for dharma gradually wanes as they advance. When the lowest point in the cycle has been reached, the first yuga begins again and a new cycle of yugas is under way.

Purāṇic literature would later add a fourth cycle, the life of Brahmā, which is said to consist of one hundred of Brahmā's years, each containing 360 days of Brahmā, or kalpas. Since the kalpa was, from early on, the basic cycle of creation and destruction, the Purāṇas now accommodate this new addition (the life of Brahmā) by positing two different kinds of world destruction and creation: a partial one regulated by the cycle of kalpas, and a total one determined by the life of Brahmā. In a sense, as was perceptively pointed out by Biardeau,[6] the microcosmic and the macrocosmic levels are here ultimately united, since Brahmā himself can be seen as reincarnating endlessly and, in so doing, setting in motion all the other large time cycles (see fig. 1).

The evidence suggests that all three cycles—the yugas, the kalpas and the manvantaras—are of different origin and were fused into a single system that tried to reconcile them numerically. The kalpa is equal, on the one hand, to one thousand mahāyugas, or rounds of the four yugas, and, on the other hand, to fourteen manvantaras; but this is not a perfect fit, as there are seventy one mahāyugas plus an addition in each manvantara.[7] A final consensus on the duration of each yuga, including the opinion of astronomers, was not reached until at least the sixth century C.E.[8] Purāṇic and Śāstric literature, however, seem to have agreed earlier.

The duration of the mahāyuga is twelve thousand years and, therefore, that of the kalpa equals twelve million years. According to the Purāṇas, these are divine years that must be further multiplied by 360 in order to determine the duration of the cycles in human years, although early textual references seem to indicate that these were, originally, considered to be human years.[9] By these calculations, every Kali Yuga has a duration of 432 thousand human years (see table 1).

Cyclical time
in Hinduism

macrocosmic level
world ages

astronomical cycles
(day, lunar month, year)

yugas:

degeneration–regeneration
of dharma

manvantaras:

periods of Manu

kalpas:
(days of Brahmā)

creation–destruction–re-creation
of the world

microcosmic level
reincarnation

rotation in *saṃsāra*

gods
humans
animals
plants
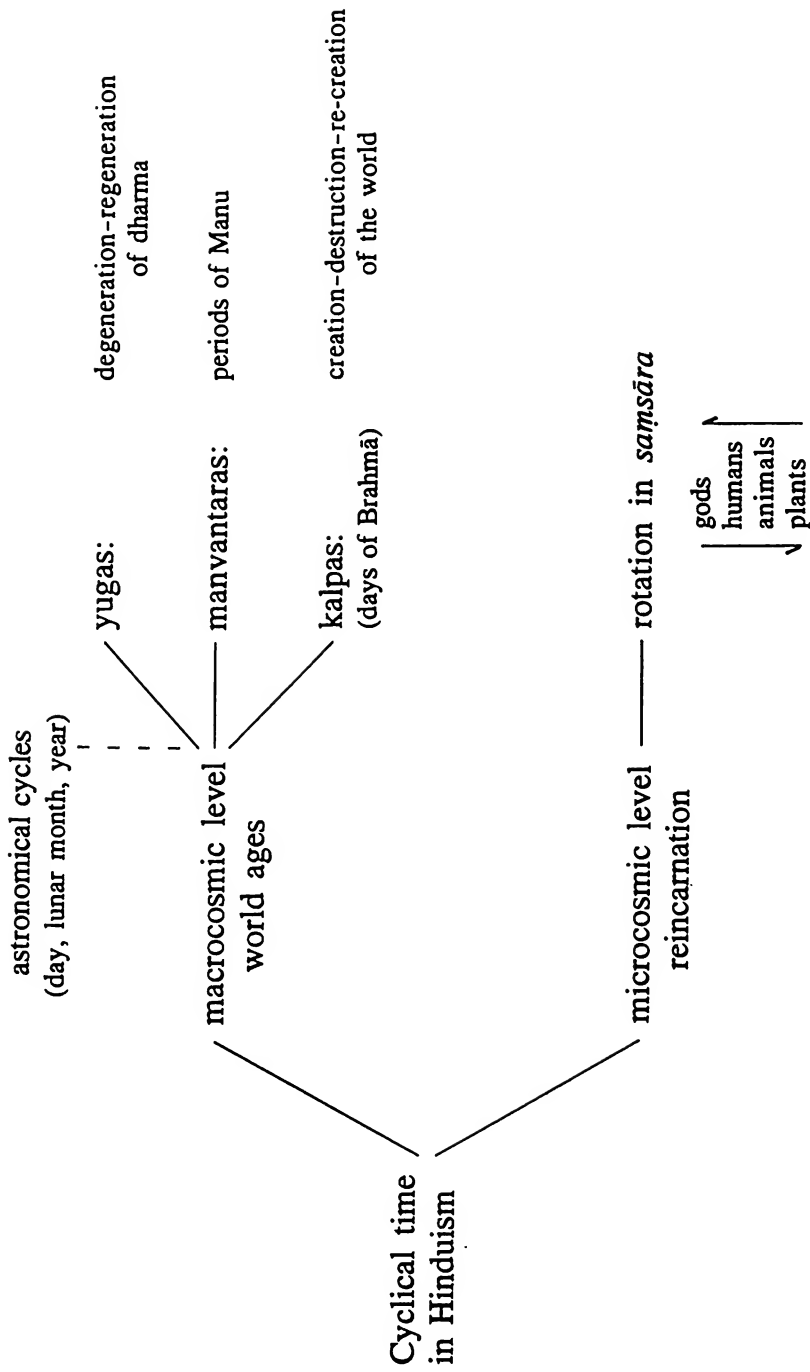
Figure 1. Cyclical time in Hinduism

Table 1. The length of the yugas according to classical Hinduism. This table shows the length of the yugas in both divine and human years. It also includes the *saṃdhis*, or transitional periods between yugas. There are two *saṃdhis* for each yuga, one at the beginning and another at the end, each lasting for one tenth of the yuga's duration.

	Years of the Gods			
Yuga	*Duration*	*one* saṃdhi	*both* saṃdhis	*Total*
Kṛta	4,000	400	800	4,800
Tretā	3,000	300	600	3,600
Dvāpara	2,000	200	400	2,400
Kali	1,000	100	200	1,200
Mahāyuga	10,000		2,000	12,000

	Human Years			
Kṛta	1,440,000	144,000	288,000	1,728,000
Tretā	1,080,000	108,000	216,000	1,296,000
Dvāpara	720,000	72,000	144,000	864,000
Kali	360,000	36,000	72,000	432,000
Mahāyuga	3,600,000		720,000	4,320,000

The Yugas

The Sanskrit term yuga was in use already in the *Ṛg Veda*, albeit not in the sense of a large, well-defined, world-cycle. Its earliest meaning with respect to time was probably to indicate a generation, one human life span. However, in the *Ṛg Veda* it can sometimes also have the broader sense of an undefined long period of time.[10] During the middle Vedic period, in the Brāhmaṇas, the

word yuga started being used more specifically to refer to periods of two, three, four, five and six years, the five-year cycle being the most common.[11] Towards the end of the Vedic period, in the fifth century B.C.E., it was used in the *Jyotiṣa Vedāṅga* as a technical term to denote a five-year, soli-lunar intercalation cycle.[12] Besides developing this technical calendrical meaning, a yuga apparently continued to symbolize an age in a general, unspecified way, although it gradually became numerically and chronologically defined, and was finally considered to be a specific, cosmic, four-fold cycle, as we now find it in the Purāṇas. The yuga theory is conspicuously absent from Vedic literature.

I might point out that it is not uncommon for a term that denotes a generation to also signify an age of the world, as we can witness the same phenomenon in other languages. The Greek word *aiōn*, for instance, can mean a generation, an age, and even eternity, as can its Latin cognate, *aevum*. Another Latin term, *saeculum*, not only denotes a generation or a long period, but it came to mean a specific period of one hundred years, a century.[13]

The four yugas are named after the throws of the Vedic dice game, and their names indicate the gradual degeneration of humankind caused by the yugas. The winning throw, Kṛta, refers to the number four and it lends its name to the first and foremost of the ages, the Kṛta Yuga, later also called the Satya Yuga, the age of truth. The throw representing three provides the name of the Tretā Yuga, the second in importance; while the third throw is the source of the name of the third yuga, the Dvāpara, which is associated with the number two. The last, and worst, of the yugas is called Kali, which is the name of the losing throw, and it has a numerical value of one. Thus, the names themselves point to an important characteristic of the yugas: a descending 4-3-2-1 sequence that applies to their duration in time as well as to other aspects of the cycle. Above all, this sequence determines the portion of dharma in every yuga. Dharma diminishes by one fourth as the yugas advance, so while it is complete in the Kṛta Yuga, in Kali only one fourth remains. To illustrate this, dharma is often said to stand on four feet in Kṛta, on three in Tretā, on two in

Dvāpara, and on only one foot in the terrible Kali Yuga, our present age.

The *Mahābhārata*

Although the purpose of this book is not to unravel the textual history of the poem, it will be useful to take a look at current opinion on the subject. There are different views as to how the *Mahābhārata* was created, and the following is meant to be a brief sketch of the main approaches to understanding the Epic's origins.[14]

We must first mention the received traditional view that the Epic is a text composed entirely by one author, Vyāsa, who is also credited with authoring the Purāṇas and arranging the Vedas. In the nineteenth century, Joseph Dahlmann offered a view similar to the traditional one, minus the religious element, by suggesting that it was put together by one single editor, and was meant simultaneously as an epic and as a didactic text on dharma, a Dharma Śāstra.[15] Dahlmann's view was not well received among Western scholars, who felt more inclined to accept Hopkins' idea—put forth soon after Dahlmann's—that the poem had gone through several stages of accretion and interpolation from an original collection of epic ballads until it became a mythologized religious document.[16] In the twentieth century, Georges Dumézil's work on Indo-European mythological themes influenced Alf Hiltebeitel's view that the Epic grew out of an Indo-European mythical model,[17] while Madeleine Biardeau (who was also influenced by Dumézil) holds that it is based on a specifically Indian mythological theme. Both Hiltebeitel and Biardeau consider the *Mahābhārata* story to have been created around mythological themes, as opposed to being an ancient story that was later mythologized.[18]

Closely related to these discussions concerning the history of the Epic are those about its unity as a text, as opposed to it being a collection of more or less disparate elements. The traditional view, as that of Dahlmann, needs to see an integral unity in the

text almost by definition, because it considers it to have been composed, or edited, by one person with a clear purpose in mind. The staunchest defender of the thematic unity of the Epic after Dahlmann has been V. S. Sukthankar, who undertook the task of editing the Critical Edition of the text. Sukthankar readily accepted that the text had many interpolations, but insisted that the main elements formed a narrative unity. Of special importance to Sukthankar was Kṛṣṇa's status as Supreme God and *avatāra* of Viṣṇu; to him, there was no question that this was an element of the story from the very beginning.[19]

Hopkins' earlier view, on the other hand, implies that although the text may have had some original thematic unity, this was compromised by large numbers of interpolations added throughout several centuries, and this accounts for the many contradictions and differences in style that are found throughout the poem. According to Hopkins, the divinity of Kṛṣṇa was a gradual euhemeristic development that turned an ancient epic hero first into a demigod, and then into the Supreme God.[20]

The more recent views of Biardeau and Hiltebeitel, however, tend to revert to a search for unity of purpose in the narrative. In their view, Kṛṣṇa was always the Supreme God in the Epic, and all elements of the narrative are woven around a few central mythological themes. One of these themes is the placement of the Epic's action at a crucial change of yuga: from the Dvāpara Yuga to our current Kali Yuga, although Biardeau finds reasons to prefer the transition from Kali to Kṛta instead.[21]

A slightly different view is expressed by A. K. Ramanujan who, while searching for cohesion in the poem, does not fully agree with Biardeau and Hiltebeitel. Ramanujan argues that although these mythological themes are illuminating, they are not overarching themes and are, instead, subordinated to the human aspect of the Epic story. He suggests that the main structuring principle of the poem is a pattern of repetition whereby certain situations are replicated throughout the narrative.[22]

In recent years, then, there has been an increasing tendency among some Western scholars to view the *Mahābhārata* as an in-

tegral whole. There is a renewed effort to find unity and coherence not only in the *Mahābhārata*, but also in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the other celebrated Indian epic.[23] Of significance in this respect is Pollock's suggestion that the history of the *Rāmāyaṇa* be analyzed not only from the point of view of its genetic history, but also from that of its receptive history:

> If earlier criticism concentrated on the epic's "genetic history" and dismembered the work in search for its primal components, we might now want to take its "receptive history" more centrally into consideration: Approaching the epic as a whole, in conformity with the traditional mode of reception, and seeing how it works as a whole can reveal a dimension of the poem's meaning easily as significant as any derived from considering the elements of its genesis. For understanding the work includes, and maybe principally so, understanding what it may have meant in Indian social, intellectual and cultural history.[24]

One must agree with Pollock's suggestion to look at both aspects of a text's history, provided they are both given equal consideration in order to get a fuller picture. But his statement that the receptive history is maybe more important runs the risk of pushing the pendulum to one extreme, after having spent some time at the other. While it is not uncommon to counter one excess with another, it hardly provides a fuller picture.[25]

The problem with placing a greater emphasis on approaching the text according to the traditional mode of reception is that it takes many assumptions for granted, not the least of which is that it was all the creation of a single author. If a text was composed throughout several centuries, the distinction between its genetic and its receptive histories becomes blurred, unless we want to consider our study of the receptive history to apply only to a restricted time period. When an interpolator is updating some element of the story, for instance, should we consider this as part of the genetic history of the text, or of its receptive history? I would argue it is part of both.

Hardly anybody today would seriously question that many materials were added to the Epic throughout a long period, but it

must be made clear that not all additions or interpolations are equally big or significant. In some cases they will give rise to contradictions while, in others, they will work well with the received text. Furthermore, if the entire text was reworked at some point, and the *Mahābhārata* probably was, the person (or persons) responsible for the task surely attempted to do it in such a way that its major themes would remain coherent. A new layer is superimposed on an earlier one, and a new reading of older materials provides them with new meaning and, thus, makes them current.[26]

I adhere to the view that there was probably an original epic story at the core of the narrative, a story based, to some extent, on actual events. The details of this 'original' story are, of course, very difficult, if not impossible, to establish.[27] The text reflects varied social, philosophical, political, and religious ideas that are coiled around this basic epic story. These different ideas are, in some cases, reflective of different periods while, in others, they constitute an exposition of differing contemporaneous opinions. And while some mythological elements may well have been present from a very early stage, others were surely added later on.

The *Mahābhārata* is a complex text, and it is risky to suggest that there is any one explanation that would account for absolutely everything. While some current readings of the *Mahābhārata* cast all historical considerations aside to construe the poem as a purely mythological text, others might tend to see historical allusions at every turn and minimize the mythological content. A balanced approach should be more productive. The poem is important both mythologically and historically, and its historical relevance does not depend on determining what the 'original' historical events were, assuming this is at all possible; its historical importance lies more in it being a reflection of historical periods. Using a basic historical/mythological plot, the text was used as a vehicle for promulgating different ideas, be they mythological, political, philosophical, religious or of other kinds.

Interpolations and reworkings tell us much about the period when they were undertaken, just as the opinions of later com-

mentators reflect on their times and express their personal views, and also, for that matter, as the interpretations of modern scholars are, to some extent, a reflection of their times and their views.[28] In any case, the different perspectives on the Epic should enrich its study, rather than hinder it.

As for tracing the historical evolution of the text, Katz has made an interesting attempt to reconcile the different views concerning the coherence and consistency of the text—or its lack thereof—by proposing somewhat of a compromise between both positions. She postulates a development in three stages. In the first stage, the epic poem existed in a fluid state as a collection of oral tales recited by *sūtas*, charioteers that also performed as bards. In the second stage, these materials were collected and re-worked at an unspecified time, probably in a royal court. At this point some didactic and devotional elements were added, and the result was the 'epic core' of the narrative. Finally, in the third stage, this transformed text continued to be transmitted in a loose form and, although the basic work remained essentially the same, interpolations and reinterpretations were added. These included the addition of more devotional materials, the appropriation of the text by the Bhārgava *brāhmaṇas* and, still later, the creation of regional variants.[29]

Outline of the Story

In the following chapters, many details of the story will be presented as they become relevant to the discussion, but a general background will be useful at this point.

The main theme of the story told in the *Mahābhārata* is the rivalry between two groups of cousins and their respective allies, who fight over the kingdom of Kurukṣetra in Northern India. When King Vicitravīrya dies childless, his half brother, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, also known as Vyāsa, fathers three sons in his place.[30] The first two of these sons of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana are the rightful claimants to the throne, because they are born to Vici-travīrya's two widows.[31] However, the eldest brother, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is born blind, so the kingdom automatically goes to his brother

Pāṇḍu. As king, Pāṇḍu undertakes military campaigns that restore the Kurus to their ancient glory, and he leads a prosperous kingdom. After some time, however, circumstances force him to withdraw into the forest and abandon the throne. As a consequence, Dhṛtarāṣṭra rules until the throne is passed on to the next generation, and it is in this next generation that the conflict breaks out.

Pāṇḍu has five sons, the Pāṇḍavas; while Dhṛtarāṣṭra fathers one hundred sons, the Dhārtarāṣṭras, also known as the Kauravas. Strictly speaking, however, both Pāṇḍavas and Dhārtarāṣṭras are Kauravas as they are all descendants of Kuru. The eldest of the Pāṇḍavas is Yudhiṣṭhira, who is recognized as the heir to the throne by virtue of being born before Duryodhana, the eldest of the Dhārtarāṣṭras. However, Duryodhana grows envious of Yudhiṣṭhira and is willing to do anything to get his cousin out of the way in order to gain control of the kingdom. He attempts to kill the Pāṇḍavas and, when that fails, he sends them into exile, where he makes a further attempt on their life. This second attempt is foiled, and when Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers return to the capital backed by allies, Duryodhana agrees to divide the kingdom in two, granting the Pāṇḍavas a remote area of the realm.

Duryodhana remains in the capital, Hāstinapura, while Yudhiṣṭhira and his four brothers found a new city called Indraprastha. But Duryodhana is envious as he watches Yudhiṣṭhira's part of the kingdom prosper, so he plots to take it away from him in order to regain control of the entire realm. To that end, his uncle Śakuni helps him devise a plan to lure Yudhiṣṭhira into playing a dice game, a game that proves disastrous for the Pāṇḍavas when Yudhiṣṭhira—thanks to Śakuni's trickery—loses everything, including his brothers Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula and Sahadeva, as well as their common wife, Draupadī. A final match is arranged and, as Yudhiṣṭhira loses again, the Pāṇḍavas agree to an exile of twelve years in the forest followed by a thirteenth year during which they must live in disguise without being recognized.

When the Pāṇḍavas have successfully completed this period,

Yudhiṣṭhira claims the throne with the help of his friend and ally, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva; however, Duryodhana is adamant in his refusal to relinquish power, and a war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas ensues. The result is devastating. All the main warriors on the Kaurava side are killed, and although the five Pāṇḍava brothers themselves are saved, their relatives and many allies die.

After the war, Yudhiṣṭhira despairs over the tragedy that took the lives of many of his relatives, and he contemplates withdrawing into the forest to live the life of an ascetic. He is talked into giving up the idea in order to fulfill his duty as a member of the ruling class, and is consequently consecrated king. After many years, on hearing of Kṛṣṇa's death, the five Pāṇḍava brothers decide the time has come for them to leave this world, and they abandon the kingdom for the Himalayas. Before departing, Yudhiṣṭhira places Arjuna's grandson, Parikṣit, on the throne, thus ensuring that the line of succession will not be broken. Parikṣit's successor is King Janamejaya, to whom the story of the *Mahābhārata* is told, during a snake-sacrifice, by Vaiśaṃpāyana, one of Vyāsa's disciples.

The *Mahābhārata* is a text of enormous proportions that, in the Critical Edition, includes some 75,000 verses. It is traditionally divided into eighteen books, or *parvans*, that vary greatly in size.[32] The number eighteen evidently had a special significance to the editor or editors of the work, as it appears repeatedly. Not only is the entire text arranged into eighteen books; the *Bhagavad Gītā* is, likewise, made up of eighteen chapters. This number shows up in different ways; the war, for instance, lasts for eighteen days, and the contending armies total eighteen in number.[33]

In the following chapters I will often use quotations from the Epic in order to help determine what the text has to say about certain relevant issues. Many of the interpretations depend on an appraisal of the usage of a few key terms, some of which have often been translated or interpreted uncritically, thus perpetuating a biased reading. In some sections I have purposefully given many examples to illustrate the usage of terms or expressions in order to convey the compelling nature of the evidence. Looking

at primary sources carefully is of importance to make sure the evidence is not forced to conform to theory. There are a number of current trends on theoretical issues and issues of methodology, and the subject is, of course, important. But before offering theoretical generalizations it is crucial to know what the texts themselves say. Only then can different theoretical perspectives be applied fruitfully.

The following statement by Masson and Patwardhan, if somewhat extreme, is significant: "No amount of theory on methodology will help one to understand Sanskrit literature. There is only one method that counts: exposure to, and familiarity with, the texts."[34] A complaint along similar lines was voiced more recently by van Buitenen, when writing about the *Mahābhārata*: "I have too often seen methodology harden into ideology and the scholar wind up talking to himself and his disciples about method and less and less about the materials..."[35] It is true that even a close familiarity with the materials can sometimes lead to different conclusions, but at least it provides a solid ground for fruitful discussions to take place.

Now that we have reviewed the main features of the Hindu system of world ages, as well as some aspects of *Mahābhārata* scholarship and the outline of its story, we can delve into our subject. We will start by looking into the importance of time and destiny in the Epic.

Notes

[1] Throughout this book, the word Epic (with a capital E) will denote the *Mahābhārata*.

[2] I have dealt at great length with the astronomical origins and the numerical structure of the theory of the yugas in González-Reimann 1988. What follows in the next few pages regarding cyclical time and the yugas, is an overview based on relevant parts of that book.

[3] Or, alternatively, waiting for the entire world to be destroyed, although this idea is not really developed in the literature. It must be pointed out that the concept of transmigration is hardly (if at all) detectable in

early Vedic literature; it is towards the end of the Vedic period that it emerges, and then later becomes ubiquitous in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. For a recent attempt at charting the evolution of ideas concerning cyclical movement as applied to transmigration, see Butzenberger 1996:107–110.

[4] Or, from a psychological perspective, just as the external world seems to come into existence when we wake up, and to disappear when we fall asleep.

[5] The term dharma can have different meanings depending on the context. In the Dharma Śāstras, for instance, Smith suggests all the following: religion, duty, law, right, justice, practice, and principle (Doniger and Smith 1991:xvii).

[6] Biardeau 1968:39–45.

[7] See González-Reimann 1988:116–121. The complexity of this combined system has sometimes confused scholars. Eliade, for example, consistently refers to the manvantara as being made up of 14 kalpas, when it is precisely the opposite: one kalpa equals 14 manvantaras. More recently, Flood (1996:113) mistakes the mahāyuga for the manvantara. For the Eliade refs. and another example, see González-Reimann 1988:20, note 9.

[8] As evinced by Āryabhaṭa's division of the mahāyuga into four yugas of equal duration, instead of following the Smṛti-sanctioned 4-3-2-1 sequence. See *Āryabhaṭīya* 1.3–4, in Shukla and Sarma 1976.

[9] As in *Mahābhārata* 3.186.18–23 and *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* 1.64–74, where it is never said that the duration of the yugas is to be understood as given in divine years.

[10] Translators of the *Ṛg Veda* will sometimes render yuga as 'generation' and other times as 'age,' depending on the context. Some relevant occurrences are *RV* 1.124.2, 5.52.4, 7.8.4, 8.46.12, where a generation is apparently meant; 1.166.13, 10.72.1–3, which seem more to refer to an undefined long age; and 7.87.4, 10.10.10, which are more ambiguous. In 1.158.6, yuga could simply mean a stage of life, that is, a short period. The phrase "in every yuga," *yuge yuge*, appears several times in the *RV*; I will address this use of the term in Chapter 6, note 49.

[11] For references and a longer discussion, see González-Reimann 1988:56.

[12] There are two extant recensions of the *Jyotiṣa Vedāṅga*, one belonging

to the *Rg Veda*, and the other to the *Yajur Veda*. Pingree (1981:9–10) considers the *Rg Veda* version, which is ascribed to Lagadha, to be the earliest, and places it around 400 B.C.E.

13 Similarly, the Chinese word *shi* means either a generation or a long period of time. In Biblical Hebrew, on the other hand, *gil* means a period in life or someone's age, while the reduplicated form *galgal* signifies a wheel. Interestingly, in later texts on qabbalah *gilgul*, which literally means rotation, would be the term for reincarnation. The Arabic cognate of *gil* is *jīl*, also meaning a generation or a period. Another term from Biblical Hebrew, *dor*, means both a generation and a period in life, as well as something circular; and its Arabic cognate, *daur*, is a phase, a period, or a rotation. And this brings us back to Sanskrit, as *daur* was the term used in the eleventh century by the Persian scholar Al-Biruni when writing, in Arabic, about the mahāyuga (Kennedy, Engle and Wamstad 1965:276).

14 For a comprehensive review of scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* (and the *Rāmāyaṇa*), see J. Brockington 1998.

15 For more on Dahlmann, see the references in note 18, below.

16 Hopkins [1901] 1969:397–398.

17 Hiltebeitel 1987:118, and [1976] 1990, Chapter 1, *passim*, with a discussion on myth and epic. Von Simson (1984:191), after writing that the relevance of the story told in the Epic is negligible for Indian history, and commenting on the current interest in mythological interpretations, asserts that "The question seems only to be what kind of mythical models should be applied..."

18 For more detailed discussions on the different approaches to the Epic, see van Buitenen 1973:xxxi–xxxv and 1978:142ff., as well as Katz 1989:9–20. See also Goldman 1995:73ff. and, more recently, J. Brockington 1998, Ch. 2: The History of Epic Studies.

19 For his views, see Sukthankar 1957.

20 See above, note 16.

21 See Hiltebeitel 1992:50–51. I will discuss some of Biardeau's and Hiltebeitel's interpretations in the following chapters.

22 Ramanujan 1991:421; 434, note 4.

23 Note the interesting distinction made by Ramanujan, while discussing Indian texts, that "not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence seems to be the end [of the authors]," (Ramanujan 1989:49; also

quoted in Goldman 1995:74).

[24] Pollock 1991:5–6. Although Pollock is here referring to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the argument is equally applicable to the *Mahābhārata*.

[25] I will discuss some of Pollock's ideas in Chapter 5.

[26] Interestingly, Ramanujan agrees that the importance of the Epic lies in its being relevant to the listener's present (1991:419), and he illustrates how different versions of the text have grown according to an internal logic by which incidents are only added where they seem to be needed (1991:441–442). But Ramanujan appears to apply this principle only to later versions of the Epic, while it is equally valid for the growth of the text before it had reached the state represented by the Critical Edition. For more comments on interpolation, see below, Chapter 5.

[27] Witzel has recently suggested that the war of the *Mahābhārata* is a legendary account based on the 'battle of ten kings' described in the seventh book of the *Ṛg Veda* (7.18), and on the battle of 20 kings mentioned in the later first book (*RV* 1.53). The battle of ten kings was won by the Bharata king Sudās, who then paved the way for the rise in importance of the Bharatas. This archetypal battle would then have been transposed from the Punjab—the site of the confrontation—to the Kurukṣetra area, where the great war of the Epic is said to have taken place (see Witzel 1995b: 331-338). Parpola, on the other hand, tentatively suggests that the Bhārata war could be modeled after battles fought when a late wave of Aryans entered the subcontinent at around 800 BCE and introduced the megalithic culture into South India. He identifies these newcomers as the Pāṇḍus/Pāṇḍavas (Parpola 1984: 430, 453-464).

[28] In this respect, it is worthwhile to mention a recent article by Bruce Lincoln (1998) that attempts to explain some of Dumézil's theories with reference to his political views and the political climate in Europe at the time when he was writing.

[29] Katz 1989:11–12. On the Bhārgava appropriation of the text see Goldman 1977; for Hiltebeitel's recent argument that the Bhārgava corpus is an inseparable element of the Epic, see Hiltebeitel 1999.

[30] This is the same Vyāsa that is said to have authored the entire poem.

[31] The third and youngest son, Vidura, has no claim to the throne because he was born to a low-class (*śūdra*) woman.

[32] There is also a tradition of dividing the poem into one hundred books.

[33] The *Rāmāyaṇa* has a similar connection to the number seven: there are seven books, Rāma's exile lasts fourteen years (7×2), and so on.

[34] Masson and Patwardhan 1969:iv.

[35] Van Buitenen 1978:143.

Chapter 1

Time and Destiny in the *Mahābhārata*

The Power of Time and Fate

As early as the *Ṛg Veda*, there is evidence of a preoccupation with the destructive aspect of time. Among the most poetic of the Ṛg Vedic hymns are those dedicated to Uṣas, the personification of dawn. According to the text, Uṣas, who with her daily arrival epitomizes the passage of time, "destroys human generations,"[1] and shortens the life of humans.[2] Later, in the Brāhmaṇas, the sacrificer who wanted to attain immortality had to overcome or "obtain" the year,[3] which was the basic unit of time and its principal manifestation, and which was now sometimes said to be death itself.[4]

By the time of the *Mahābhārata*, however, time had taken on an even more prominent, and more ominous role. Although the hymns to Uṣas and the later exhortations of the Brāhmaṇas to overcome the year already reflect a preoccupation with human decay and death, this concern apparently did not alter the basic life-affirming attitudes of Vedism. By contrast, the *Mahābhārata* views time as an oppressive, overpowering force that relentlessly pushes all beings towards their eventual death, and is inextricably intertwined with the uncontrollable force of destiny. So intense is the concern with its destructive nature, that time virtually becomes a synonym of death and destruction.

Time, *kāla*,[5] is a major player in the *Mahābhārata*'s epic drama, and, in order to see the extent of its importance, we will look closely at some relevant passages from the poem. We shall begin with the events recounted in the tenth book, the Sauptika Parvan,[6] and then continue with passages from other books.

After the Kaurava defeat at the battle of Kurukṣetra, the Kaurava Aśvatthāman, along with Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman, attacks the Pāṇḍava camp at night while everyone is asleep. They kill the sons of the Pāṇḍavas and destroy their army as well as that of their Matsya allies. The Pāṇḍavas themselves are saved because they were not in the camp at the time. Aśvatthāman, who goes about furiously dismembering and killing his foes, is described as "death himself, brought forth by time."[7] Before the carnage, the god Śiva had given him his blessing and declared that the Pāñcālas were already doomed because their time was up:

> I have paid my respects to him (Kṛṣṇa) by protecting the Pāñcālas; but they have been overcome by time, they now have no life [left].[8]

From the beginning of the battle, some Pāṇḍava warriors had been having recurrent premonitory dreams of Aśvatthāman attacking them, and of the terrible goddess Kālarātrī taking them away.[9] She is said to be:

> Black, with blood-red mouth and eyes, wearing a red garland and red ointment; dressed in [only] one red garment, with a noose in her hand, and wearing a crest.

> Ready to leave, taking men, horses and elephants bound with terrible ropes, and [taking] several kinds of dead spirits of disheveled hair [also] bound with ropes.[10]

Her name is particularly fitting in this context, as it means "the night of time." When the warriors saw what was taking place, they remembered their dreams and realized their premonitions had become true. The text explains they were now being "ravaged by destiny."[11] In the confusion, they killed one another "impelled by time,"[12] and with their "minds overpowered by fate."[13]

It is then made clear that no one escapes the grip of time and

destiny, for "there is no doubt, the revolution of time is uncon-
querable,"[14] and "time is impossible to overcome."[15] That all this
could happen is proof that "nothing is too difficult for destiny."[16]

When King Yudhiṣṭhira hears the dreadful news of the events
of that night, he painfully declares that:

> The course of things is difficult to know, even to those of celes-
> tial vision. The others were defeated and now they conquer; we
> conquered and are now defeated.[17]

This is not far from Subhadrā's lamentation when, earlier in the
Epic, she hears of the death of her (and Arjuna's) son, Abhi-
manyu, in battle:

> Surely, the course of destiny (*kṛtānta*) is very difficult to know
> even to the wise, if you, whose protector is Keśava (Kṛṣṇa),
> were killed in battle as if you had no protector.[18]

When Arjuna himself vows to kill Jayadratha, who had been in-
strumental in the death of their son, he is troubled at the prospect
of the killing. Kṛṣṇa appears in his dreams and, in a replay of
what had taken place in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, summons him to ac-
tion:

> Don't fix your mind on sadness Pārtha! Time is invincible. Time
> forces all beings towards the ultimate fate [death].[19]

Indeed, in the *Gītā* itself, when Kṛṣṇa reveals his terrifying divine
form to Arjuna he explains their situation as follows:

> I am time, the destroyer of the worlds, fully grown. I am here to
> destroy the worlds. Even without you, all will be no more, these
> ready warriors in opposing armies.
>
> Conquer your enemies... I have [already] killed them long ago.
> Be the mere instrument...![20]

It is now clear that all the players are but instruments of time and
fate, as everything has already been pre-determined. As Saṃjaya
tells King Dhṛtarāṣṭra when he laments over the dead at the great
battle, "this was surely destined long ago and is now happening,
King."[21] Elsewhere, when referring to the great battle, it is stated

that:

> Time, the wonder worker who made the Kauravas its instrument, brought the Pāṇḍava and Kaurava armies together in that place and there destroyed them.[22]

It was Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself who had said:

> I think this is the law (dharma) of the permanent revolution of time. Attached to the wheel like a rim, one cannot escape.
>
> ...The foolish Kurus are dying controlled by time.[23]

Before the battle, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wise father, Vyāsa, had tried to prepare him for the inevitable:

> O King! Your sons' time is up, as is the time of other kings. They will meet in battle and kill each other.
>
> When those whose time is up die, o Bhārata! do not grieve, as you know the revolution of time.[24]

However, when King Dhṛtarāṣṭra hears that his sons have been killed, he is overcome by grief and blames everything on fate:

> My old age, the destruction of all my relatives, and the death of my friends and allies happened because of fate (*daivayogāt*).[25]

Then follows a teaching about the unavoidable and impartial character of death and time. In Vidura's words:

> No one is agreeable or disagreeable to time, best of the Kurus! Time is never an arbiter. Time drags everything away.[26]
>
> Time...is the destroyer of all embodied beings; he is the one who takes everyone.[27]

Earlier, Dhṛtarāṣṭra had recited a long list of slain warriors and had grieved in similar terms:

> 29. If my sons are being killed while fighting in battle in the midst of those [Pāṇḍavas], what else can it be but fate (*bhāga-dheya*)?
>
> 30. If Bhīṣma, the brave lord of the world, was killed after encountering Śikhaṇḍin, like a lion [killed by] a jackal,

31. If Droṇa, the *brāhmaṇa*, master of all weapons and missiles, was killed in the war by the Pāṇḍavas, what else can it be but fate?

32. If Bhūriśravas was killed in the fight, and Somadatta, and the great king of the Bāhlīkas, what else can it be but fate?

33. If Sudakṣiṇa was killed, and the Kaurava Jalasandha, along with Śrutāyus and Acyutāyus, what else can it be but fate?

34. If Bṛhadbala was killed, and the strong Māgadha [king]; if [the king] of Avanti was killed, and the king of the Trigartas, and all the Saṃśaptakas, what else can it be but fate?

35. So King Alambusa, and even the *rākṣasa* Alāyudha, and also Ārśyaśṛṅga; what else can it be but fate?

36. If the Nārāyaṇas were killed, as were the Gopālas who are so fierce in battle, and many thousands of Mlecchas, what else can it be but fate?

37. If Śakuni, the son of Subala, was killed, as was the strong, heroic Kaitavya [king], who was accompanied by his army, what else can it be but fate?

38. If many kings and princes, and heroes armed with many clubs were killed, what else can it be but fate?

39. O Saṃjaya! If the *kṣatriyas* who came from many lands were all killed in battle, what else can it be but fate?

40. My strong sons and·grandsons were killed, as were my friends and brothers; what else can it be but fate?

41. Man is certainly born with his fate. A man [who is born] endowed with good fortune shall find happiness.

42. I [was born] deprived of good fortune, and so here I am deprived of my sons, Saṃjaya! How will I today, old as I am, fall under the control of the enemy?[28]

Fifteen years after the war, an aged, frail and guilt-laden Dhṛtarāṣṭra retires to the jungle with his wife Gāndhārī. There, a learned *brāhmaṇa* attempts to ease his sorrow by explaining that neither he nor his sons are to blame for all the deaths. It was all

caused by irresistible destiny.[29]

It is evident from all these passages (and there are many more like them)[30] that whenever someone grieves over those who have died in battle, time and destiny are blamed, and resignation is called for. But the climax in this unstoppable chain of events controlled by time is to be found towards the end of the Epic, in the Mausala Parvan, the "Book of the Clubs."[31] The book describes how, after many years of peace, Kṛṣṇa's clan is destroyed, and he himself dies:

> When thirty-six years had passed great misfortune came upon the Vṛṣṇis. Impelled by time, they killed each other with clubs.[32]

> Son killed father and father killed son, o Bhārata! Drunk, they attacked and annihilated one another.[33]

It had been thirty-six years earlier, shortly after the end of the battle, that Gāndhārī, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife and mother of the one hundred Kauravas, had sorrowfully accepted the death of her sons as the result of uncontrollable destiny:

> Those princes, who would kill even the gods with the power of their weapons, were slain in battle. Look at the revolution of time!

> There is surely nothing too difficult for destiny, o Mādhava (Kṛṣṇa)! if these heroes, these best of *kṣatriyas*, were killed by *kṣatriyas*.[34]

But Gāndhārī had blamed Kṛṣṇa for being indifferent in the face of all the killings, and she had cast a curse upon him:

> Because you, Govinda, ignored the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas, who are relatives, as they killed each other, you shall kill your own relatives.[35]

> When the thirty-sixth year arrives, Madhusūdana, you will kill your relatives, counselors and sons, and then go to the forest and meet your death by vile means.[36]

The time had now come for the curse to be fulfilled,[37] and after a second curse was cast by several *brāhmaṇas*, the doom of the

Vṛṣnis and their allies was imminent:[38]

> When the Vṛṣnis along with the Andhakas were thus trying [to avoid their death], time constantly roamed about all their houses.

> [He had the appearance of] a dreadful and ugly dark-brown bald man. Then again, he was [sometimes] not seen as he entered the houses of the Vṛṣnis.[39]

All their efforts were in vain, however, and, driven by time, the Yādavas ended up killing each other in a drunken brawl. Kṛṣṇa, who knew that time had now run its course, watched in rage and then joined the killing:

> Then, impelled by time, the Andhakas, the Bhojas, the Śaineyas and the Vṛṣnis killed each other with clubs in a violent melee.[40]

> The one of great arms, Madhusūdana, knowing the revolution of time, stood looking holding up a club.[41]

> Seeing [his brother] Gada lying [dead], he became very angry. The holder of the Śārṅga [bow], the discus, and the mace then completely destroyed the clan.[42]

Events now unfold in quick succession. Kṛṣṇa, recognizing that Gāndhārī's words are now becoming true, prepares to die, and is soon killed by the arrow of a hunter who mistakes him for a deer.[43] The city of Dvārakā is flooded and sinks into the ocean, and Kṛṣṇa's father, Vasudeva, also dies. The remaining wives of the warriors are abducted—or are even taken willingly—by the Ābhiras, who were "impelled by the course of time,"[44] while Arjuna is unable to intervene:

> He (Arjuna) became depressed, Pārtha, thinking 'this is destiny.' He then turned back, King, and said 'this is the end.'[45]

Arjuna then goes to his grandfather, the sage Vyāsa, who informs him that the time for his (Arjuna's) departure is at hand.[46] Vyāsa's teaching regarding these terrible events is, by now, predictable:

> Time is the source of all this, it is the root of the world, Dhanaṃjaya! Time, again, takes away at will.[47]

Vyāsa had made a similar statement earlier in the poem, and at that time had, significantly, been referred to as a *kālavādin*, a propounder of the doctrine of time as the supreme principle. His pronouncements cannot be taken lightly in the context of the *Mahābhārata*, as he is the purported author of the entire Epic, as well as the wise father of Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and thus, the grandfather of both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. His admonition to Dhṛtarāṣṭra before the war is recounted in the following way:

> Then he [Vyāsa], the *kālavādin*, the great ascetic, spoke these words: 'there is no doubt, king of kings, time destroys the universe, and then again creates the worlds. Nothing here is permanent.'[48]

After his meeting with Vyāsa, Arjuna delivers the devastating news to King Yudhiṣṭhira, who then answers, overcome by grief:[49]

> Time cooks all beings, wise one! I think this is the imprint of karma; you should also see it.[50]

Agreeing with his elder brother, Arjuna simply utters the words "time, time!"[51] Now, as the epic cycle draws to a close, Yudhiṣṭhira determines that Arjuna's grandson, Parikṣit, shall be the future king of the Kurus.[52] The five Pāṇḍava brothers and their wife Draupadī then give up all worldly belongings and journey towards the Himalayas, ready to leave this world. The following book, the last in the Epic, describes Yudhiṣṭhira's arrival in heaven, and is aptly called Svargārohaṇa Parvan, the Book of the Ascent to Heaven.

It must be pointed out that all throughout the Mausala Parvan an intensely somber atmosphere pervades everything. Bad omens of all sorts appear, including changes in the course of rivers and in the appearance of the Sun and Moon. Animals behave erratically, and strange noises are heard. The prevailing atmosphere, and the omens in particular, are very similar to the circumstances immediately preceding the great battle at Kurukṣetra. Kṛṣṇa himself draws the analogy:

This resembles that which Yudhiṣṭhira remarked upon formerly when, as the troops were arrayed, he saw terrible omens.[53]

These two moments in the Epic, along with the nocturnal massacre at the Pāṇḍava camp, are heavily laden with foreboding and the sense that an irresistible, ruthless destiny is at work. It is, however, in the last of these instances, towards the end of the *Mahābhārata*, that the sense of doom and helplessness is more intense, precisely because it accompanies the final destruction of the Yādavas and, in fact, the closing events of the entire Epic.

Kṛṣṇa, Fate and Free Will

Kṛṣṇa's role in all of this deserves some comment. When he is portrayed as the Supreme God, as in the *Gītā* passages quoted above, he is said to be time itself, bent on destroying the world. In Saṃjaya's words:

> The Lord Keśava makes the wheel of time, the wheel of the world, and the wheel of the yugas revolve ceaselessly by his own power (*yoga*).

> The Lord alone rules time, death and the moving and standing creatures. I tell you this truthfully.[54]

But when he becomes a player in the epic events things are different. When asked to try to avert the imminent war, he says:

> This has been determined by the great souls of old through [their] wisdom, that the affairs of the world take place because of both fate and human effort.[55]

> I will do the most that can be done by human effort, but I cannot do anything about fate.[56]

Nonetheless, after the final destruction of the Yādavas, and Kṛṣṇa's own death, Vyāsa explains to Arjuna that:

> This was destined for these great souls [that have died], and so it had to be. Kṛṣṇa let it happen even though he was capable of preventing it.[57]

However one wishes to reconcile these contradictory statements, it is clear that, as events unfold, even Kṛṣṇa must conform to, and accept, time and destiny, regardless of whether on another level he himself may be considered to be their controller. Ultimately, what is important is that time brought about all these events, and nothing could be done to alter or stop them. In the first book of the Epic, while reciting the summary of the contents of the Mausala Parvan, the following explanation is given:

> After causing total destruction there, neither Rāma (Balarāma) nor Keśava (Kṛṣṇa) overcame time, which had arrived and is all-destroying and impartial.[58]

Kṛṣṇa is simply being forced to act within the strictures imposed by destiny, like every other player in the Epic. The relationship between fate and free will is plainly articulated by Dhṛtarāṣṭra when he despairs over the death of Karṇa:

> I think destiny is superior, and to hell with useless human effort, if Karṇa, of pleasing appearance, was killed in battle![59]

And later:

> An action is intended one way, but it is controlled [so as to result] another way. Alas, destiny is powerful, and time is unconquerable![60]

Elsewhere, Vyāsa confirms his conclusion:

> The course set by destiny cannot be controlled by any being, even if he strives for a long time; that is my opinion.[61]

Man, Dhṛtarāṣṭra had said earlier to Vidura, is controlled by destiny like a puppet on a string:

> Man is not the lord of what is and what is not. [He is] like a wooden doll bound by strings. He was, no doubt, placed under the control of fate (*diṣṭa*) by the creator (Dhātṛ)...[62]

There are attempts to grant free will a more prominent role but, even then, it is usually in a position subordinate to destiny.[63] A chapter of the Anuśāsana Parvan is devoted to exalting free will, but it does not put aside destiny. Rather, it says that destiny re-

quires human action in order to run its course. In reply to a question by Yudhiṣṭhira, who asks which is superior, destiny or free will, Bhīṣma tells him of the teaching Pitāmahā (Brahmā) imparted to Vasiṣṭha:

> Destiny is not accomplished without human action, just as a field without sown seed bears no fruit.[64]

There is even a mention of the epic events:

> The kingdom that was stolen from them by the powerful Dhārtarāṣṭras, was recovered by the Pāṇḍavas not because of destiny, [but] by relying on the strength of [their] arms.[65]

Still, even here, free will is more the instrument, the ally of destiny, than a force opposed to it:

> Destiny proceeds well when supplied with action, just like a fire, even if small, becomes big when fanned by wind.[66]

The chapter ends with the following verse:

> By the power of destiny [and] by acts undertaken, by fate and action, one attains the road to heaven.[67]

But what is the source of this powerful, irresistible destiny? When Dhṛtarāṣṭra seeks an explanation for the terrible fate that has befallen him, he concludes that the cause must lie in something he did in previous lives, although he cannot remember anything that could warrant such terrible retribution:

> I cannot remember any past misdeed of mine, Saṃjaya, for which I am here today, in confusion, suffering this result!

> I surely committed some offense in previous births, for which the creator (Dhātṛ) has allotted me these fateful, sorrowful acts.[68]

Destiny, then, is explained here through the mechanism of karma: what is happening now must be the consequence of former actions. But there is a larger mythological scheme behind the Epic's events, a scheme that involves the need to relieve the Earth of her excessive burden of people, especially of *kṣatriyas*.[69]

The feud between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas is thus

staged as a re-enactment of the Vedic confrontation between the gods and the demons, the *devas* and the *asuras*. The righteous Pāṇḍavas are born from gods,[70] and the Kauravas are the incarnated demons.[71] Kṛṣṇa was born for the specific purpose of alleviating the burden of the Earth by destroying the incarnated demons.[72] So during Arjuna's encounter with Vyāsa after Kṛṣṇa's death, the sage explains that Kṛṣṇa died because he had accomplished his mission:

> After reducing the burden of the Earth, and having freed the whole world, the one of broad eyes (Kṛṣṇa) went to his high dwelling.

And the Pāṇḍavas had helped him:

> You also performed this great deed of the gods, bull among men (Arjuna), together with your ally Bhīma and the twins (Nakula and Sahadeva), O you of great arms![73]

But, even if the ultimate source of the Epic's happenings is sought in a mythological plot, it is always time, inescapable and all-powerful, that brings them about.

There are several chapters in the Mokṣadharma section of the Śānti Parvan that set forth the doctrine of time as the supreme principle, and they basically echo what is said in all the quotes translated in the previous pages.[74] It is these Mokṣadharma passages that are usually quoted by scholars when reviewing the Epic's doctrines concerning time, while the importance of time throughout the epic narrative tends to be overlooked. In the previous discussion, I have intentionally left out the Mokṣadharma passages, as they are more in the nature of a philosophical exposition not directly related to the Epic's events. Moreover, they could be considered as simply one among the several competing and contradicting doctrines collected in the Mokṣadharma. My purpose above was to show that these doctrines about the relentless and fateful destructive power of time are an integral part of the Epic. They are delivered in the context of events, and have a direct bearing on how the players interpret what is happening to them.[75] The *Mahābhārata* has, no doubt, its share of optimistic

ideals and hopeful attitudes but, as events unfold, and as the Epic nears its end, it is unstoppable time that overrides all other forces and drives events to their conclusion.

Two Kinds of Time

We have seen how time and destiny occupy a position of great importance in the *Mahābhārata*. In order to further clarify their import in the Epic and their relevance to the yuga theory, I will now compare the Epic's approach when confronted with the problem of time, to the approach of a text of a different nature, the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*.

The Epic's approach is summed up in the first book,[76] when it is told how Saṃjaya comforts Dhṛtarāṣṭra as he laments over all the dead:

> You have heard from Dvaipāyana and from the wise Nārada of kings of great perseverance and great strength.

> Born in great royal lineages and endowed with virtues, they knew the celestial weapons and were equal to Śakra (Indra) in splendor.

> They conquered the Earth through dharma, they promoted sacrifices with abundant offerings, and they attained fame in this world. Then, they fell under the control of time.[77]

Saṃjaya then recites the names of twenty four kings, and a second list of sixty five kings.[78] Despite their strength and wisdom, they all met with destruction, as did Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons.[79] He continues:

> Even the wise and excellent ancient poets, who had told stories in the world, and who were endowed with every virtue, met with death.[80]

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons were evil, says Saṃjaya,[81] and what happened has to be accepted:

> It was to be this way, so you should not grieve. [Even] with special wisdom, who can escape destiny?

No one can go beyond the path determined by the creator (Dhātṛ).[82] Time is the source of all this, being and non-being, happiness and unhappiness.

Time cooks all beings, time destroys all creatures. Time, again, extinguishes the time that consumes the creatures.

Time produces all beings in the world, good and bad. Time destroys all creatures and creates them again. Time moves in all beings, unrestrained, impartial.

Past and coming beings, and those who are now, are created by time. Knowing this, don't lose your senses.[83]

Let us now look at the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*. It begins with the story of King Bṛhadratha, who gives up his worldly possessions and retires to the forest intent on performing austerities. When requesting the sage Śākāyanya for his teachings, the king discourses on the impermanence of the world. He decries the transitory nature of the body, as well as of plants, animals, and even supernatural beings. He also recites, in terms that appear too close to the Epic passage above to be merely coincidental, a list of kings and heroes that eventually died despite their prowess. "What about those?" asks Bṛhadratha, "other superior [beings], great archers, great rulers like... (a list of fifteen names)... and the others. Or kings like Marutta, Bharata and so on? [They all] left their great glory behind and, as their relatives watched, they went from this world to the other."[84] The *Maitrāyaṇīya* then moves on to teachings about the eternal *ātman*, and how to attain it.

The two texts approach the problem of time in opposite ways. While they both start out by pointing to its destructive aspect—in both cases quoting lists of kings and heroes that could not escape the grip of time—the *Mahābhārata* solves it by teaching resignation and acceptance: things must follow their course, and what has to happen will happen. One should overcome grief, and carry on with one's duties. The *Maitrāyaṇīya*, on the other hand, when confronted by the same problem, expounds the teachings on the eternal *ātman*, and explains that there is a way out through *mokṣa*, spiritual liberation. It discourses on the two forms of *brahman*, in

time and outside of time,[85] and how to transcend the lower *brahman* and attain the supreme *brahman*, which is beyond time.

The comparison can be made using just one verse. We had quoted earlier the words of Yudhiṣṭhira when hearing of Kṛṣṇa's death and the destruction of the Yādavas:

> Time cooks all beings, intelligent one! I think this is the imprint of karma; you should also see it.[86]

The *Maitrāyaṇīya*, as if answering Yudhiṣṭhira, quotes the following verse:

> Time cooks all beings, but he who knows the great *ātman* in which time is cooked, he is a knower of the Veda.[87]

Consider also the following Epic verse quoted above:

> Time cooks all beings, time destroys all creatures. Time, again, extinguishes the time that consumes all creatures.[88]

The contrast is clear. According to the Epic, time cooks all beings and there is nothing to be done about it. Time also extinguishes itself, as one cycle replaces another. But, in the *Maitrāyaṇīya*, all-consuming time itself is said to be, in turn, cooked by something superior, the *ātman*.[89]

Note the interesting use of the verb 'to cook' (*pacati*) when alluding to the influence of time. The Sanskrit verbal root *pac* has a wide semantic range that conveys the ideas of cooking, burning, digesting, ripening, maturing, and consuming. Time is said to ripen things "like a fruit on a tree."[90] It also cooks and burns, in the sense that it consumes things and leads them to their eventual destruction:

> No one touched by time can avoid it, small and large creatures are completely cooked [in time's fire].[91]

> Time has no lord (*anīśa*), it is ever watchful, and is always cooking all beings. It is constant, and he who arrives in his domain is not freed.[92]

But, to return to our comparison, the *Mahābhārata*, to be sure, also has much to say about liberation, especially in the *Bhagavad*

Gītā, which is part of the Bhīṣma Parvan; and in the Mokṣa-
dharma section of the Śānti Parvan,[93] as well as at other places,
such as the Sānatsujātīja section of the Udyoga Parvan.[94] Indeed,
the verse just quoted from the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* appears, in
almost identical form, in the Mokṣadharma while describing the
ineffable nature of the *ātman*:

> Time cooks all beings by itself in itself, but no one here knows
> him in whom time is cooked.[95]

Nevertheless, it is clear that the over-arching paradigm of the epic
core of the Epic (pun intended), is that time is inescapable and
events must follow their course. Teachings on liberation, if they
imply renouncing the world, can be considered as secondary in
terms of the story told in the *Mahābhārata* which is, after all, an
epic poem concerned with dharma and life in society.

The difference in approach between the Epic and the
Upaniṣad—and we can now extend this to mean the Upaniṣads in
general—can, therefore, be better understood by taking into ac-
count that, in the Epic, it is of the utmost importance to fulfill
one's social duty: one must go on with life even in the face of
the most terrible adversities. For the Upaniṣads, on the other
hand, renunciation is considered to be the superior path.

For the players of the Epic, renouncing the world and seeking
liberation is not an option. They must remain within the social
structure and accept the harsh realities that come their way, espe-
cially in their role as *kṣatriyas* and rulers. Thus, even in the *Gītā*,
the teachings on liberation and transcendence are framed in the
context of Arjuna's need to fulfill his *kṣatriya* dharma. He cannot
honorably avoid the fight, with its inevitable consequence of
death for many of his own relatives, but this is countered with
teachings about the immortality of the soul, the *ātman*. Dying (in
battle), therefore, is not really dying, as it is only the body that
dies, while the *ātman* is eternal.[96]

Kṛṣṇa thus reminds Arjuna of his duty when he considers
shying away from the battle:

> Being aware of your own [*kṣatriya*] dharma you should not

shrink. There is nothing better for a *kṣatriya* than a righteous (*dharmya*) battle.

And it is an open door to heaven that presented itself by chance; *kṣatriyas* who receive such a battle are joyous, Pārtha![97]

If Arjuna takes part in the war he will have the best of one of the two worlds:

Either you are killed and will obtain heaven, or you conquer and will enjoy the earth. Therefore rise, Kaunteya, determined to do battle![98]

In the Strī Parvan, Vidura tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra:

Neither by [celebrating] sacrifices, nor by [giving] many gifts [to *brāhmaṇas* for their services], nor by ascetic practices or knowledge do men go to heaven as do heroes killed in battle.[99]

After all, in the very first verse of the *Bhagavad Gītā* the field of the Kurus, Kurukṣetra, where the great war is to be fought, is allegorically referred to as the field of dharma, *dharmakṣetra*.[100] And although dharma can here be understood in the broader sense of righteousness, it still reflects the need to act within the boundaries of the established social order.

In contrast to this idealized picture of *kṣatriya* dharma, before the war Yudhiṣṭhira (who, it must be remembered, is himself the son of Dharma) talks about war and the dharma of *kṣatriyas* with the realism that is characteristic of much of the Epic. "What virtue is there in war?" he asks,[101] and then declares:

The dharma of *kṣatriyas* is evil, and we are of *kṣatriya* families. It is our own dharma, even if [it might bring] injustice (*adharma*). Any other conduct is prohibited to us.

The *śūdra* obeys, *vaiśyas* live off trade, we live off killing, and the *brāhmaṇas* have chosen the begging bowl.[102]

But, despite these harsh words against war and the dharma of *kṣatriyas*, Yudhiṣṭhira dutifully submits to it, as do all the other players.

I would suggest that the two approaches to time, the epic and

the upaniṣadic, can be considered to represent two kinds of time, or, more precisely, to refer to time as it applies in two different sets of circumstances. The time that drives all the events of the Epic, and which can not be overcome, is, above all, time as it affects society and the social order, with its concomitant dharma. I will refer to it as "historical" time, in order to simplify the discussion. On the other hand, when time can be overcome through spiritual liberation, it refers to time as it affects the individual, and I will here call it "personal" time. There is, of course, not an absolute distinction between the two, as personal time works from within historical time, and individuals themselves are part of society and historical events, as long as they do not decide to break away from historical time and operate in personal time.[103]

Historical time implies living in the world as part of society and following the rules of dharma, particularly *varṇa-dharma*, the duties according to social class. In personal time, the individual distances himself from the world and society, and from all the limitations that these impose on him. He attempts to break away from destiny, and go beyond time altogether. In this sense, the opposition between personal and historical time can be tied-in to the contradiction between liberation and life in the world, between the *saṃnyāsin* and society.

Despite the fact that in the Epic most remarks concerning the destructive, inevitable, nature of time are made in connection with the personal suffering of the players, everything transpires within the larger context of the fratricidal confrontation that ultimately ended with the annihilation of both sides of the family and their allies. The larger context is of a more historical nature and goes beyond the individual fate of any one player. At the same time, it is inextricably linked to the need to act according to the codes of conduct laid down by dharma.

The Rope of Time

Before ending this chapter, I will comment briefly on an interesting metaphor that is used for describing how time entraps be-

ings in this world. Time, whether personified as a man or as a woman (as in the case of Kālarātrī), is said to have a rope with which he/she ties beings and carries them away to their death. This is reminiscent of the fetters or the noose that Yama, the Vedic god of death, uses on his victims. In the Epic, this description is sometimes also linked to Vedic sacrifice. In Vedic ritual, the sacrificial animal (*paśu*) was tied to the ritual post with a rope, and then killed.[104] In the *Mahābhārata*, time, which leads to death, is considered to have all beings in this world trapped and bound with a rope. The sacrificial imagery seems clear in a Mokṣadharma passage referred to above which deals with all-powerful, supreme time. The demon king, Bali, after acknowledging that he is "bound by time's rope,"[105] tells Indra:

> Over there stands that fierce black man (time) whom no one can conquer. He tied me up like a [sacrificial] animal (*paśu*) [that is tied] with a rope.[106]

The depiction of life in the world as bondage was to become fundamental to Hinduism. Individuals are considered to be bound (*baddha*) in the cycle of death and rebirth, the wheel of *saṃsāra*, which is the realm of time. In opposition to this, spiritual transcendence was, as we have seen, to be characterized as liberation (*mokṣa*) from such bondage. The following passage from one of the Purāṇas, the *Agni*, plays with the different levels of meaning. A Vaiṣṇava disciple addresses Viṣṇu during his ceremony of initiation as he prepares to sacrifice some animals:

> You alone are the refuge for release from the bonds (*pāśa*) that keep animals (*paśu*) sunk in the ocean of *saṃsāra*; always you, oh god, who are compassionate towards your devotees!

> With your blessing I will release these animals (*paśu*) that are bound (*pāśita*) by the bonds (*pāśa*) and fetters (*bandhana*) of *prakṛti*.[107]

Here the animals, the *paśus*, are not only the real animals that will be sacrificed but also, metaphorically, the suffering human beings that wish to be released from the bondage of this world.

Liberation implies breaking free from the grip of time in order

to attain a state which is beyond time and, therefore, beyond death. Going from bondage to liberation, then, is going from death to immortality.[108] The Buddhist state of *nirvāṇa* is, in this sense, equivalent to the Hindu concept of liberation: it is also beyond death and rebirth and, consequently, beyond time.[109] The symbolical connection between bondage in this temporal world and the bound Vedic sacrificial animal probably played a part in the establishment of the Hindu terminology of spiritual bondage and liberation.[110]

Notes

[1] *praminatī manuṣyā yugāni, RV* 1.124.2. Note that the term for "generation" is yuga.

[2] *RV* 1.92.10; see also 1.179.1.

[3] It is a common assertion of the Brāhmaṇas that the sacrificer "obtains" (*āpnoti*) the year by performing certain rituals.

[4] "The year is certainly death, with [every] day and night he [gradually] destroys the life-span of mortals, so they die; therefore, he is death," *eṣa vai mṛtyur yat samvatsaraḥ / eṣa hi martyānām ahorātrābhyām āyuḥ kṣiṇoty atha mriyante tasmād eṣa eva mṛtyuḥ ...*, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.4.3.1.

[5] The term *kāla* itself only appears once in the *Ṛg Veda*, at 10.42.9 (in a verse that mentions gambling), but in the *Atharva Veda* there are two hymns dedicated to it as the supreme principle (19.53–54). It is common in later texts.

[6] The reason for the book's name, literally "the book related to sleep," will be clear from what follows.

[7] *kālasṛṣṭa iva antakaḥ, Mbh.* 10.8.39,71. *Antaka* literally means "the bringer of the end."

[8] *kṛtas tasyaiṣa sammānaḥ pāñcālān rakṣatā mayā / abhibhūtās tu kālena naiṣām adyāsti jīvitam //* 10.7.63. According to 1.61.66–67, Aśvatthāman was born from a combination of Śiva (Mahādeva), death (*antaka*), lust (*kāma*) and anger (*krodha*).

[9] 10.8.64 ff.

[10] *kālīm raktāsyanayanām raktamālyānulepanām / raktāmbaradharām ekam*

pāśahastāṃ śikhaṇḍinīṃ // narāśvakuñjarān pāśair baddhā ghoraiḥ pratasthuṣīṃ / harantīṃ vividhān pretān pāśabaddhān vimūrdhajān // 10.8.64–65.

[11] *daivenopanipīḍitāḥ,* 10.8.69.

[12] *kālenābhipracoditāḥ,* 10.8.94.

[13] *daivopahatacetasaḥ,* 10.8.96.

[14] *asaṃśayam hi kālasya paryāyo duratikramaḥ,* 10.8.143.

[15] *kālo duratyayaḥ,* 10.9.22.

[16] *na daivasya atibhāvo 'sti,* 10.9.10.

[17] *durvidā gatir arthānām api ye divyacakṣuṣaḥ / jīyamānā jayanty anye jayamānā vayaṃ jitāḥ //* 10.10.10.

[18] *nūnaṃ gatiḥ kṛtāntasya prājñair api sudurvidā / yatra tvaṃ keśave nāthe saṃgrāme 'nāthavaddhataḥ //* 7.55.19.

[19] *mā viṣāde manaḥ pārtha kṛthāḥ kālo hi durjayaḥ / kālaḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni niyacchati pare vidhau //* 7.57.6.

[20] *kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ / ṛte 'pi tvā na bhaviṣyanti sarve ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyanīkeṣu yodhāḥ // jitvā śatrūn... / mayaivaite nihatāḥ pūrvam eva nimittamātraṃ bhava... //* 6.33.32–33 (*BhG* 11.32–33). The notion that the players are only instruments when killing someone who was already destined to die appears elsewhere in the Epic, as in Book 3, when Yudhiṣṭhira chastises Bhīma for killing the *rākṣasas* and *yakṣas* of the god Kubera's army. Kubera himself appeases Yudhiṣṭhira with the following words: "And you should not feel anger towards Bhīmasena, Pāṇḍava; time killed them long ago, your younger brother was [merely] the instrument," *na ca manyus tvayā kāryo bhīmasenasya pāṇḍava / kālenaite hatāḥ pūrvaṃ nimittam anujas tava //* 3.158.42. See Vassilkov 1999:23, 28, who refers to this notion as the motif of the previously killed.

[21] *diṣṭam etat purā nūnam evaṃ bhāvi narādhipa //* 6.16.6. Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself had previously used almost the same words: "I think this was destined long ago, and it will surely happen," *diṣṭam etat purā manye bhaviṣyati na saṃśayaḥ*; 6.3.44.

[22] *sametās tatra vai deśe tatraiva nidhanaṃ gatāḥ / kauravān kāraṇaṃ kṛtvā kālenādbhutakarmaṇā //* 1.2.25.

[23] *manye paryāyadharmo 'yaṃ kālasyātyantagāminaḥ / cakre pradhir ivāsakte*

nāsya śakyaṃ palāyitum // ...*ete naśyanti kuravo mandāḥ kālavaśaṃ gatāḥ //* 5.50.58–59.

[24] *rājan parītakālās te putrās cānye ca bhūmipāḥ / te haniṣyanti saṃgrāme samāsādyetaretaram // teṣu kālaparīteṣu vinaśyatsu ca bhārata / kālaparyāyam ājñāya mā sma śoke manaḥ kṛthāḥ //* 6.2.4–5.

[25] *pariṇāmaśca vayasaḥ sarvabandhukṣayaśca me / suhṛnmitravināśaś ca daivayogād upāgataḥ //* 11.1.19.

[26] *na kālasya priyaḥ kaścin na dveṣyaḥ kurusattama / na madhyasthaḥ kvacit kālaḥ sarvaṃ kālaḥ praharṣati //* 11.2.14.

[27] *kāla... / antakaḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ dehinām sarvahāry asau //* 11.6.7.

[28] 29. *teṣāṃ madhye sthitā yatra hanyante mama putrakāḥ / vyāyacchamānāḥ samare kim anyad bhāgadheyataḥ //* 30. *bhīṣmaś ca nihato yatra lokanāthaḥ pratāpavān / śikhaṇḍinaṃ samāsādya mṛgendra iva jambukam //* 31. *droṇaś ca brāhmaṇo yatra sarvaśastrāstrapāragaḥ / nihataḥ pāṇḍavaiḥ saṃkhye kim anyad bhāgadheyataḥ //* 32. *bhūriśravā hato yatra somadattaś ca saṃyuge / bāhlikaś ca mahārāja kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 33. *sudakṣiṇo hato yatra jalasaṃdhaś ca kauravaḥ / śrutāyuś cācyutāyuś ca kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 34. *bṛhadbalo hato yatra māghadaś ca mahābalaḥ / āvantyo nihato yatra trigartaś ca janādhipaḥ / saṃśaptakāś ca bahavaḥ kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 35. *alambusas tathā rājan rākṣasaś cāpy alāyudhaḥ / ārśyaśṛṅgaś ca nihataḥ kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 36. *nārāyaṇā hatā yatra gopālā yuddhadurmadāḥ / mlecchāś ca bahusāhasrāḥ kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 37. *śakuniḥ saubalo yatra kaitavyaś ca mahābalaḥ / nihataḥ sabalo vīraḥ kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 38. *rājāno rājaputrāś ca śūrāḥ parighabāhavaḥ / nihatā bahavo yatra kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 39. *nānādeśasamāvṛttāḥ kṣatriyā yatra saṃjaya / nihatāḥ samare sarve kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 40. *putrāś ca me vinihatāḥ pautrāś caiva mahābalāḥ / vayasyā bhrātaraś caiva kim anyad bhāgadeyataḥ //* 41. *bhāgadheya-samāyukto dhruvam utpadyate naraḥ / yaś ca bhāgyasamāyuktaḥ sa śubhaṃ prāpnuyān naraḥ //* 42. *ahaṃ viyuktaḥ svair bhāgyaiḥ putraiś caiveha saṃjaya / katham adya bhaviṣyāmi vṛddhaḥ śatruvaśaṃ gataḥ //* 9.2.29–42.

[29] 15.16.1–2; see also 15.16.5, 9.

[30] For instance Dhṛtarāṣṭra's words on hearing of Bhīṣma's death: "Time is surely the great conqueror, impossible for anyone to overcome, if you tell me that Bhīṣma Śāṃtanava lies dead, Saṃjaya!" *kālo nūnaṃ mahāvīryaḥ sarvalokaduratyayaḥ / yatra śāṃtanavaṃ bhīṣmaṃ hataṃ śaṃsasi saṃjaya //* 6.15.56.

[31] Book 16; its name derives from the fact that clubs, created by the

curse of some *brāhmaṇas*, are used for many of the killings described in the book.

[32] *ṣaṭṭriṃśe 'tha tato varṣe vṛṣṇīnām anayo mahān / anyonyaṃ musalais te tu nijaghnuḥ kālacoditāḥ //* 16.2.2.

[33] *avadhīt pitaraṃ putraḥ pitā putraṃ ca bhārata / mattāḥ paripatanti sma pothayantaḥ parasparam //* 16.4.40.

[34] *ye hanyuḥ śastravegena devān api nararṣabhāḥ // ta ime nihatāḥ saṃkhye paśya kālasya paryayam / nātibhāvo 'sti daivasya dhruvaṃ mādhava kaścana / yad ime nihatāḥ śūrāḥ kṣatriyaiḥ kṣatriyarṣabhāḥ //* 11.25.29-30.

[35] Kṛṣṇa smilingly accepts Gāndhārī's words, and confirms what she has said, as if it all had been meant to happen thus anyway: "it is known, Śubhā, that there is no other destroyer of the Vṛṣṇi clan but myself," *saṃhartā vṛṣṇicakrasya nānyo mad vidyate śubhā,* 11.25.44.

[36] *yasmāt parasparaṃ ghnanto jñātayaḥ kurupāṇḍavāḥ / upekṣitās te govinda tasmāj jñātīn .vadhiṣyasi // tvam apy upasthite varṣe ṣaṭṭriṃśe madhusūdana / hatajñātir hatāmātyo hataputro vanecaraḥ / kutsitenābhyupāyena nidhanaṃ samavāpsyasi //* 11.25.40-41.

[37] It is so stated in 16.3.18-19.

[38] This second curse (described in 16.2.4-12) was not really necessary (except, maybe, to furnish the clubs used for the killings), and it does not seem to fit smoothly into the narrative. It is probably significant that in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (5.37.3 ff.) version of this episode there is no mention of Gāndhārī's curse—the blame is placed solely on the curse of the *brāhmaṇas*. This suggests that the Epic's version could be the result of conflation.

[39] *evaṃ prayatamānānāṃ vṛṣṇīnām andhakaiḥ saha / kālo gṛhaṃ sarveṣāṃ paricakrāma nityaśaḥ // karālo vikaṭo muṇḍaḥ puruṣaḥ kṛṣṇapiṅgalaḥ / gṛhāṇy avekṣya vṛṣṇīnāṃ nādṛṣyata punaḥ kvacit //* 16.3.1-2.

[40] *tato 'ndhakāś ca bhojāś ca śaineyā vṛṣṇayas tathā / jaghnur anyonyam ā-krande musalaiḥ kālacoditāḥ //* 16.4.36.

[41] *taṃ tu paśyan mahābāhur jānan kālasya paryayam / musalaṃ samavaṣṭabh-ya tasthau sa madhusūdanaḥ //* 16.4.42.

[42] *gadaṃ vīkṣya śayānaṃ ca bhṛśaṃ kopasamanvitaḥ / sa niḥśeṣaṃ tadā cakre śārṅgacakragadādharaḥ //* 16.4.44.

[43] 16.5.16-25. It is noteworthy that the hunter's name is Jarā, which means "old age." So Kṛṣṇa was, quite literally, killed by Old Age, that is, by time. The word *jarā* is common in early Buddhism as an indica-

tion of decay and death, and is used to illustrate the impermanence of life in the world. A *sutta* from the early *Sutta Nipāta* (a text from the Pali Canon) is called Jarāsutta: *Sutta Nipāta* 4.6 (Aṭṭhakavagga), PTS ed. p. 158–160.

[44] Or "impelled by the expiration/revolution of time," *kālaparyāyacoditāḥ*, 16.8.48. Compare 6.2.5, in note 24, above.

[45] *babhūva vimanāḥ pārtho daivam ity anucintayan / nyavartata tato rājan nedam astīti cābravīt //* 16.8.64. The last part of this verse is a repetition of 16.6.3d.

[46] "The time for [your] departure has come," *gamanaṃ prāptakālam*, 16.9.31.

[47] *kālamūlam idaṃ sarvaṃ jagadbījaṃ dhanaṃjaya / kāla eva samādatte punar eva yadṛcchayā //* 16.9.33.

[48] *punar evābravīd vākyaṃ kālavādī mahātapāḥ / asaṃśayaṃ pārthivendra kālaḥ saṃkṣipate jagat // sṛjate ca punar lokān neha vidyati śāśvatam /* 6.4.2–3.

[49] This takes place at the beginning of the following book, the Mahāprasthānika Parvan, or Book of the Great Departure, as it describes the Pāṇḍavas' final departure from the kingdom.

[50] *kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇy eva mahāmate / karmanyāsam ahaṃ manye tvam api draṣṭum arhasi //* 17.1.3.

[51] *kālaḥ kāla iti*, 17.1.4. This would seem like a final confirmation of the inevitable destructive nature of time, and the acceptance of the nearness of the end. According to the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha: "'time' is used twice to mean 'inescapable.' Inevitable time is death, it must happen now, why wait? That is the meaning." *kāla kāla iti nityārtha dvitvam / aparihāryaḥ kālo mṛtyuḥ so 'dyaivāstu kiṃ cireṇety āśayaḥ //*

[52] 17.1.7–8.

[53] *idaṃ ca tadanuprāptam abrāvid yad yudhiṣṭhiraḥ / purā vyūdheṣv anīkeṣu dṛṣṭvotpātān sudāruṇan //* 16.3.20. For the omens before the war, see 6.2.17–6.3.42 and 6.19.36–41.

[54] *kālacakraṃ jagaccakraṃ yugacakraṃ ca keśavaḥ / ātmayogena bhagavan parivartayate 'niśam // kālasya ca hi mṛtyoś ca jaṅgamasthāvarasya ca / īśate bhagavan ekaḥ satyam etad bravīmi te //* 5.66.22–23.

[55] Literally, "...the actions of the world come together in the divine and the human."

[56] *tad idaṃ niścitaṃ buddhyā pūrvair api mahātmabhiḥ / daive ca mānuṣe caiva saṃyuktam lokakāraṇam // aham hi tat kariṣyāmi paraṃ puruṣakārataḥ / daivaṃ tu na mayā śakyaṃ karma kartuṃ kathaṃcana //* 5.77.4–5.

[57] *bhavitavyaṃ tathā tad dhi diṣṭam etan mahātmanām / upekṣitaṃ ca kṛṣṇena śaktenāpi vyapohitum //* 16.9.26.

[58] *yatra sarvakṣayaṃ kṛtvā tāv ubhau rāmakeśavau / nāticakramatuḥ kālaṃ prāptaṃ sarvaharaṃ samaṃ //* 1.2.222.

[59] *daivam eva paraṃ manye dhik pauruṣam anarthakam / yatra rāma-pratīkāśaḥ karṇo 'hanyata saṃyuge //* 8.5.29.

[60] *anyathā cintitaṃ kāryam anyathā tat tu jāyate / aho nu balavad daivaṃ kālaś ca duratikramaḥ //* 8.5.45.

[61] *na ca daivakṛto mārgaḥ śakyo bhūtena kenacit / ghaṭatāṃpi (ghaṭatāpi?) ciraṃ kālaṃ niyantum iti me matiḥ //* 11.8.18.

[62] "The creator," here in the sense of "arranger" or "distributor" [of fate], Dhātṛ. *Anīśvaro 'yaṃ puruṣo bhavābhave sūtraprotā dārumayīva yoṣā / dhātrā tu diṣṭasya vaśe kilāyaṃ...* 5.39.1. Draupadī's words to Yudhiṣṭhira in Book 3 are very similar: "Only the creator (Dhātṛ), the lord, bestows everything on beings, happiness and unhappiness, kindness and offense, [even] before the emission of semen. These creatures, king, are like an assembled wooden doll; he makes body and limbs move, hero among men." *dhātaiva khalu bhūtānāṃ sukhaduḥkhe priyāpriye / dadhāti sarvam īśānaḥ purastāc chukram uccaran // yathā dārumayī yoṣā naravīra samāhitā / īrayaty aṅgam aṅgāni tathā rājann imāḥ prajāḥ //* 3.31.21–22. Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ are said to be sons of Brahmā (1.60.49).

[63] I might point out here that the *Rāmāyaṇa* holds the same view of time and destiny as the *Mahābhārata*. For a discussion and relevant quotes from the text, see Pollock 1986: 33–36.

[64] *yathā bījaṃ vinā kṣetram uptaṃ bhavati niṣphalam / tathā puruṣakāreṇa vinā daivaṃ na sidhyati //* 13.6.7.

[65] *pāṇḍavānāṃ hṛtaṃ rājyaṃ dhārtarāṣṭrair mahābalaiḥ / punaḥ pratyāhṛtaṃ caiva na daivād bhujasaṃśrayāt //* 13.6.40.

[66] *yathāgniḥ pavanodbhūtaḥ sūkṣmo 'pi bhavate mahān / tathā karma-samāyuktaṃ daivaṃ sādhu vivardhate //* 13.6.44.

[67] *abhyutthānena daivasya samārabdhena karmaṇā / vidhinā karmaṇā caiva svargamārgam avāpnuyāt//* 13.6.49. In the Śānti Parvan (Book 12) there is also a section exalting free will as opposed to time/destiny. As part of Bhīṣma's instructions to Yudhiṣṭhira on the duties of a king, he tells

him a story that criticizes attributing everything to time, and advocates the need to act in order to accomplish things (12.137.45-53, 78-79). But, once again, although stating that action is the path of superior men, it still considers destiny and action as mutually dependent: "Destiny and action depend on each other. Action is the doctrine of the noble, the weak depend on destiny." *daivaṃ puruṣakāraś ca sthitāv anyonyasaṃśrayāt / udāttānāṃ karma tantraṃ daivaṃ klībā upāsate //* 12.137.78. In a long passage of Book 3, Draupadī, after bitterly blaming Dhātṛ (the distributor of fate) for the misfortune of the Pāṇḍavas, is rebuked by Yudhiṣṭhira, who takes her words as an assault on dharma. She then moderates her position and says that things have three causes: fate (*diṣṭa/daiva*), chance (*haṭha*) and human effort (*puruṣaprayatna*) (3.33.30-32). The passage is 3.31.21-3.33.55. I will discuss it in more detail in Chapter 4.

[68] *na smarāmy ātmanaḥ kiṃcid purā saṃjaya duṣkṛtam / yasyedaṃ phalam adyeha mayā mūḍhena bhujyate // nūnaṃ hy apakṛtaṃ kiṃcin mayā pūrveṣu janmasu / yena māṃ duḥkhabhāgeṣu dhātā karmasu yuktavān //* 11.1.17-18. For similar statements by personages of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, see Pollock 1986:35.

[69] Besides its possible connection with ideas of overpopulation (see O'Flaherty [1976] 1980:28,258-260), this explanation can be construed as an attempt to provide a rationale, a mythical and religious justification for war; at least for the Bhārata war.

[70] Yudhiṣṭhira is the son of Dharma, Bhīma of the Wind (Vāta/Māruta), Arjuna of Indra, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva of the Aśvins; 1.61.84-85, 1.90.69, 72.

[71] Ramanujan (1991:423) makes the interesting observation that, for three generations, most major male characters in the Epic, including the Pāṇḍava brothers, have a human as well as a supernatural parent. The Kauravas, however, are entirely human.

[72] For a long description, see 1.58.25-1.59.6; see also 6.62.8-11, 13.143.12, 12.337.29-31. It is noteworthy that, in all these passages, Kṛṣṇa is identified with Nārāyaṇa; in fact, the reference to Book 12 is part of the Nārāyaṇīya section of the Mokṣadharma. This mythological explanation also implies an interesting paradox, as Kṛṣṇa's relatives, the Yādavas, whom he destroys, then have to be considered as incarnated demons. In what is probably an earlier version of the story, Kṛṣṇa is born in order to *save* his relatives by killing a demon, the wicked King Kaṃsa, who is oppressing them (2.13.29, 34; 2.55.6-7).

For a full discussion of the purpose of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation, see Gon-
zález-Reimann 1993, *passim*.

[73] *kṛtvā bhārāvataraṇaṃ pṛthivyāḥ pṛthulocanaḥ / mokṣayitvā jagat sarvaṃ
gataḥ svasthānam uttamam // tvayā tviha mahatkarma devānāṃ pu-
ruṣarṣabha / kṛtaṃ bhīmasahāyena yamābhyāṃ ca mahābhuja // 16.9.29-
30.*

[74] The main section is 12.216-220, where the intention seems to be, be-
sides expounding the theory of time, to show that the Vedic god Indra
is not as important as he might think himself to be; he simply gains
and loses prominence as determined by time, just like all other beings.
This needs to be understood in the context of the waning importance
of Vedism, and the growth of what was to be called Hinduism. I must
disagree with Bedekar's ([1961] 1992:187, 192, 202) interpretation of
these passages. He sees in the fact that these doctrines are propounded
by Bali, the king of the demons, an indication that they are to be con-
sidered heterodox and against the Epic's ideas. He does not account for
the fact that Bhīṣma tells the story to Yudhiṣṭhira without comment,
thus endorsing it. He also seems to completely separate these passages
from all others about time throughout the Epic by arguing that, in all
others, when the players are impelled by time it simply means that a
"particular occurrence or event represents the fructifying moment of the
past Karman" (p. 201). This, I would argue, is a false distinction. An-
other relevant chapter, and the most philosophical one in terms of its
closeness to the philosophical schools, the *darśanas*, is 12.267. It de-
scribes, in Sāṃkhya style, how all the elements come from time, and
the soul (*kṣetrin*) transmigrates "from body to body... impelled by
time," *dehād dehaṃ...kālasaṃcoditaḥ*, 12.267.33.

[75] Shulman (1991:11) concurs: "we might, in fact, regard this whole epic
as an extended essay, carried along on a complex narrative frame, on
time and its terrors." Vassilkov (1999:25), after a detailed analysis of
relevant passages, also concludes that ideas about time are central to
the story of the *Mbh*. He writes that "the teaching on the omnipotence
and vicissitudes of Time is inherent in the epic world outlook."

[76] This sub-section of the Ādi Parvan is the Anukramaṇī Parvan, the
"index," or more precisely, the "description of the contents" of the
Epic.

[77] *śrutavān asi vai rājño mahotsāhān mahābalān / dvaipāyanasya vadato
nāradasya ca dhīmataḥ // mahatsu rājavaṃśeṣu guṇaiḥ samuditeṣu ca / jātān
divyāstravīduṣaḥ śakrapratimatejasaḥ //   dharmeṇa pṛthivīṃ jitvā yajñair*

iṣṭāptadakṣiṇaiḥ / asmiṃl loke yaśaḥ prāpya tataḥ kālavaśaṃ gatāḥ //
1.1.163–165.

[78] 1.1.166–178.

[79] 1.1.180.

[80] *vidvadbhiḥ kathyate loke purāṇaiḥ kavisattamaiḥ / sarvarddhi guṇasaṃpan-
nās te cāpi nidhanaṃ gatāḥ //* 1.1.182.

[81] 1.1.183–185.

[82] Literally, "no one can go beyond the path arranged by the arranger," or "distributed by the distributor [of fate]."

[83] *bhavitavyaṃ tathā tacca nātaḥ śocitum arhasi / daivaṃ prajñāviśeṣeṇa ko
nivartitum arhati // vidhātṛvihitaṃ mārgaṃ na kaścid ativartate / kālamūlam
idam sarvaṃ bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe // kālaḥ pacati bhūtani kālaḥ saṃ-
harati prajāḥ / nirdahantaṃ prajāḥ kālaṃ kālaḥ śamayate punaḥ // kālo vi-
kurute bhāvān sarvāṃl loke śubhāśubhān / kālaḥ saṃkṣipate sarvāḥ prajā
visṛjate punaḥ / kālaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu caraty avidhṛtaḥ samaḥ // atītān
āgatā bhāvā ye ca vartanti sāmpratam / tān kālanirmitān buddhvā na
saṃjñāṃ hātum arhasi //* 1.1.186–190.

[84] *kim etair vā / pare 'nye mahādhanurdharāś cakravartinaḥ kecit...(...)...-
adayo 'tha maruttabharataprabhṛtayo rājano miṣato bandhuvargasya ma-
hatīṃ śriyaṃ tyaktvāsmāl lokād amuṃ lokaṃ prayānti //* MU 1.4. Seven of the kings mentioned in the *MU* list are also in the *Mbh.* list, they are: Śaśabindu, Ambarīṣa, Śaryāti, Yayāti, Anaraṇya, Marutta and Bharata.

[85] *MU* 6.15.

[86] *kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇy eva mahāmate / karmanyāsam aham manye
tvam api draṣṭum arhasi //* 17.1.3. I must add here that some northern manuscripts, including that of the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha, read *kālapāśam,* "the noose/net of time," instead of *karmanyāsam,* "the imprint of karma," which is the chosen reading of the CE.

[87] *kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇy eva mahātmani / yasmiṃs tu pacyate kālo yas
taṃ veda sa vedavit //* MU 6.15.

[88] *kālaḥ pacati bhūtani kālaḥ saṃharati prajāḥ / nirdahantaṃ prajāḥ kālaṃ
kālaḥ śamayate punaḥ //* Mbh. 1.1.188.

[89] Compare this to the Buddhist version of the same idea in the Pali Canon: "time eats all beings, along with itself, but he who eats time, he cooks the cooker of beings," where, according to the commentator, he who eats time is the enlightened person. The Pali verse reads: *kālo
ghasati bhūtāni sabbān' eva sah' attanā / yo ca kālaghaso bhūto sa bhūta-*

pacaniṃ pacīti // Jātaka vol. 2, p. 260, (Pali Text Society edition). The verse and the commentary were translated by Collins (1992:228).

[90] *vṛkṣe phalam iva*, 12.220.84. The ripening of a fruit seems like a natural extension of the idea of cooking, as attested by the cognate Greek adjective *pepōn*, "cooked by the Sun, ripe." As a noun, *pepōn* means "melon" ("edible when ripe"). The Indo-European root, *pekʷ, already had the meanings "to cook," and "to ripen," and from it also comes the English "cook." The Greek verb *peptein* also included the meaning "to digest," whence English "peptic" and "pepsin."

[91] *kālāgni*, mentioned in the preceding verse (12.220.92).

[92] *na cātra parihāro 'sti kālaspṛṣṭasya kasyacit / sūkṣmāṇāṃ mahatāṃ caiva bhūtānāṃ paripacyatām // aniśasyāpramattasya bhūtāni pacataḥ sadā / anivṛttasya kālasya kṣayaṃ prāpto na mucyate //* 12.220.93-94. See also 12.220.102, and 12.217.39.

[93] The Mokṣadharma is 12.168-353.

[94] The Sānatsujātīja is 5.42-45. In this section, Dhṛtarāṣṭra receives teachings on immortality (or "non-death"), *amṛta*. In the context of the Epic, van Buitenen (1978:182) characterizes these teachings as "instruction as consolation."

[95] *kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇy evātmanātmani / yasmiṃs tu pacyate kālas taṃ na vedeha kaścana //* 12.231.25. There are many parallels between the *MU* and the *Mbh*, as shown by Hopkins ([1901] 1969:33-46), who generally believes the Epic to have borrowed from the Upaniṣad. As the *MU* presents the verse as a quote, one could argue that it was taken from the Epic, but, of course, both texts could have borrowed it from a third source. The idea of time's effect as cooking/ripening was probably quite common. Hopkins does not discuss the *Mbh.* verse (nor the lists of kings) in his comparison of the two works, but he refers to the "time cooks" expression in *MU* 6.15, and says it appears in his edition of the Epic at 11.2.24. This verse was not included in the CE, but occurs in many northern mss.; the first half is almost identical to 1.1.188, quoted above. It reads: "Time cooks all beings, time destroys all creatures; time is awake when all else is asleep, time is unconquerable," *kālaḥ pacati bhūtani kālaḥ saṃharate prajāḥ / kālaḥ supteṣu jāgarti kālo hi duratikramaḥ //* quoted in the CE's apparatus as inserted after 11.2.14.

[96] 6.24.17-30 (*BhG* 2.17-30).

[97] *svadharmam api cāvekṣya na vikampitum arhasi / dharmyād dhi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate // yadṛcchayā copapannaṃ svarga-*

dvāram apāvṛtam / sukhinaḥ kṣatriyāḥ pārtha labhante yuddham īdṛśam // 6.24.31–32 (*BhG.* 2.31–32).

[98] hato vā prāpsyasi svargaṃ jitvā vā bhokṣyase mahīm / tasmād uttiṣṭha kaunteya yuddhāya kṛtaniścayaḥ // 6.24.37 (*BhG.* 2.37).

[99] na yajñair dakṣiṇāvadbhir na tapobhir na vidyayā / svargaṃ yānti tathā martyā yathā śūrā raṇe hatāḥ // 11.2.11.

[100] 6.23.1 (*BhG.* 1.1).

[101] kiṃ nu yuddhe 'sti śobhanam, 5.70.45.

[102] pāpaḥ kṣatriyadharmo 'yam vayaṃ ca kṣatrabāndhavāḥ / sa naḥ sva-dharmo 'dharmo vā vṛttir anyā vigarhitā // śūdraḥ karoti śuśrūṣāṃ vaiśyā vipaṇijīvinaḥ / vayaṃ vadhena jīvāmaḥ kapālaṃ brāhmaṇair vṛtam // 5.70.46–47.

[103] In this sense, destiny would be linked primarily to historical time, and free will to personal time.

[104] The term used for the rope that held the animal to be sacrificed was usually *raśanā*, but *pāśa*, from the same verbal root as *paśu*, is the one generally used to refer to the rope of time; *pāśa* is also a noose, as in the case of Yama's noose.

[105] kālapāśena baddhaṃ, 12.220.81.

[106] ayaṃ sa puruṣaḥ śyāmo lokasya duratikramaḥ / baddhvā tiṣṭhati māṃ rau-draḥ paśuṃ raśanayā yathā // 12.220.82. I might also point out that, in the Sauptika Parvan, during the night attack on the Pāṇḍava camp, Aśvatthāman is said to have "offered to Kālarātrī" (*kālarātryai nya-vedayat*, 10.8.78) those whom he killed.

[107] saṃsārārṇavamagnānāṃ paśūnāṃ pāśamuktaye / tvam eva śaraṇaṃ deva sadā tvaṃ bhaktavatsala // devadevānujānīhi prākṛtaiḥ pāśabandhanaiḥ / pāśitān mocayiṣyāmi tvatprasādāt paśūn imān // *Agni Purāṇa* (9th century) 27.18–19. Prakṛti is the realm of nature/matter (as opposed to puruṣa, spirit/consciousness), in which transmigration takes place. Note that in the Sāṃkhya system of philosophy the symbolism of the rope is re-fined further; in the words of Jacobsen (1999:27): "Prakṛti is the active material principle that binds the passive puruṣa-s with the three strands of the rope (triguṇa-s) of materiality."

[108] So the well-known ritual verses cited by the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.3.28): "lead me from non-existence to existence, lead me from dark-ness to light, lead me from death to immortality," *asato mā sad gamaya tamaso mā jyotir gamaya mṛtyor māmṛtaṃ gamaya*. It is significant that

the Upaniṣad glosses both non-existence and darkness as death (*mṛtyu*), and both existence and light as immortality (*amṛta*), thus turning the three verses into a threefold repetition of the same plea: "lead me from death to immortality."

[109] See Collins 1992:230; and Pande 1993:207.

[110] The term *paśu*—the Vedic sacrificial animal—was to be used by Śaiva sects to mean the (bound) individual soul, and Śiva's Vedic epithet of Paśupati, "the lord of animals", was then construed as "lord of souls." The word *pāśa* (rope, noose), on the other hand, became, in Jainism, a term for the external world, where souls are bound. The 'loosening of the rope' as a metaphor for being freed from anguish or guilt was already used in the *Ṛg Veda*. In *RV* 2.28.6c, Varuṇa is asked to "set me free from anguish as one sets free a calf from a rope" (lit., "untie/eliminate [my] anguish as one would untie the rope of a calf"), *dāmeva vatsād vi mumugdhy aṃho*. See also *RV* 1.24.13–15. For other relevant Vedic uses of the symbolism of bondage in connection to death, sacrificial dogs, and dice (as an expression of fate), see White 1989:296–297.

Chapter 2

Yugānta: The End of the Yuga

The *Mahābhārata* and the Yuga Theory

I have dealt at some length with the meaning and importance of time and destiny in the *Mahābhārata* because, as will become clear further on, this will help us clarify the relationship between the Epic and the yuga system. In Purāṇic Hinduism, as well as in all other later developments based on it, the *Mahābhārata* plays a fundamental role in the yuga scheme, as the events it chronicles are considered to mark the end of the Dvāpara Yuga and the beginning of our present Kali Yuga. Moreover, it is a common belief in the Purāṇas that the Kali Yuga started precisely at the moment of Kṛṣṇa's death, so the Epic plays a pivotal role in both traditional history and the mythology of the yugas.[1] Thus, for traditional Hinduism—and for many modern scholars as well—the yuga theory forms an integral part of the plot of the *Mahābhārata*.[2]

So it is that the renowned writer Irawati Karve, who writes with insight and perception about the Epic's ethos in her aptly-titled book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, sums up the commonly held assumptions simply and briefly when she says that "according to Hindu beliefs, the *Mahābhārata* war was fought at the end of the Dvāpara. The beginning of the Kali was the signal for the heroes to start their last journey. The *Mahābhārata* thus marks the end of a yuga."[3]

This statement, of course, implies that the players are acting purposefully because they know that the yuga is coming to a

close; the entire plot of the Epic, in fact, would be dependent on its taking place when the Kali Yuga was about to begin. But, is the yuga theory really an essential part of the Epic's plot? And can we, for that matter, take it for granted that the *Mahābhārata* has full knowledge of the classical yuga system?

Let us take a closer look at Karve's statement. Her assertion that the beginning of the Kali Yuga was the signal for the heroes, the Pāṇḍavas, to start their last journey is not supported by the text. Neither, by the way, is the more specific Purāṇic belief that Kali began with the passing away of Kṛṣṇa; the Epic says nothing to that effect. As we have seen, when Yudhiṣṭhira hears of Kṛṣṇa's death, and of the destruction of the Yādavas, he decides to abandon the kingdom, and the five Pāṇḍavas then start their journey toward the Himalayas. This is described in the Mahāprasthānika Parvan,[4] while the death of Kṛṣṇa and of the Yādavas is part of the preceding book, the Mausala.[5] It is very significant that neither of these two books (nor the very last Svargārohaṇa Parvan)[6] makes any mention whatsoever of the Kali Yuga or, for that matter, of any other yuga or the yugas in general. In the final three books of the *Mahābhārata* the yugas are never mentioned, let alone invoked as the cause of events.[7] As we know, the immediate blame for the death of Kṛṣṇa and his relatives is put on Gāndhārī's curse, and on the curse of the *brāhmaṇas*. This, in turn, is subsumed in the larger mythological framework that explains the entire Epic in terms of the need to lighten the burden of the earth by annihilating the incarnated demons. But, above all of this is the relentless power of time, which ultimately destroys everything, and in whose domain even the mythological plot must unfold.

So, if at the crucial ending of the Epic, when Kṛṣṇa and his relatives, as well as the Pāṇḍavas, die, the text is silent on the yugas, where is it made clear that all these events take place during the change from the Dvāpara to the Kali Yuga? As we shall see later on, this is stated clearly at remarkably few places, while in many others it is a matter of interpretation.

In order to have a better idea of how the theme of the end of

the yuga is played in the *Mahābhārata*, and what its connection is to the story itself, there are three things we will look at more closely: the meaning of the word *kali*, and its use in the Epic; the role played by dice and the dice throws; and the use of the term yugānta in the poem.

The Term *kali* and the Dice Throws

It is important to remember that, besides being the name of the worst yuga, the term *kali* is very closely linked to the game of dice, and dice play a significant role in the Epic. Kali is the name of the losing throw, but the word can also mean misfortune, discord, quarrel, and even war. It can refer to the personification of bad luck, of discord, or of the losing throw itself and, as an adjective, it indicates the worst of something. All of these meanings are used in the Epic, and it is sometimes not clear which one is intended. It is important not to assume that a reference to the Kali Yuga is obvious each time the word is used. Let us look at some relevant examples.

In the Rājadharma section of the Śānti Parvan,[8] a section that deals with the duties of the king, Nakula states that "a king who does not protect the people is considered to be *kali*."[9] He goes on to say that they, the Pāṇḍavas, should be charitable kings, otherwise they themselves will become *kali* kings (*rājakalayaḥ*).[10] I will return to the subject of the dharma of kings further on, but there can be little doubt that what is meant here by a '*kali* king' is a bad or unworthy king.

Elsewhere, the story is told of a woman called Vidurā, who complains bitterly about her son, Saṃjaya, because he is depressed after being defeated in battle. After calling him a coward and wishing that no other woman would ever give birth to the likes of him, she tells him "I gave birth to Kali with you, Saṃjaya, passing off for my son."[11] In this case, it seems clear that a personification of misfortune is intended, or perhaps a statement about the son being 'the worst.'

These two examples illustrate how *kali* is used in different

contexts to describe something as being bad or unworthy,[12] but more important for our purposes is the use of the term in connection with the confrontation between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas.

In the Udyoga Parvan,[13] Yudhiṣṭhira, while talking to Kṛṣṇa about how terrible it would be if war broke out, tells him: "in war there is always discord (*kali*), Kṛṣṇa!" Now, here Roy's translation reads "O Kṛṣṇa, Kali is ever present in battlefields," clearly taking *kali* as a personification, although a personification of what is not as clear. [14] One would assume it would still be a personification of discord or misfortune.

Later, when Yudhiṣṭhira realizes that war is inevitable, he laments the fact that, despite all efforts to avoid it, "a great conflict/misfortune (*kali*) has come to us."[15] Here, Dutt takes *kali* as a personification, as he translates: "...has the mighty Kali come." In this case, Dutt's version could either be taken to mean the personification of discord/misfortune, or even of the Kali Yuga.[16]

Of particular interest is the following instance from the second book. When Vidura hears that King Dhṛtarāṣṭra will allow the dicing match against Yudhiṣṭhira that his son Duryodhana has asked for, he worries and goes before the king:

> When the wise Vidura heard this [he knew that] the door to conflict (*kalidvāra*) was at hand, and that it was the beginning of the destruction [of the Kurus], so he ran to Dhṛtarāṣṭra.[17]

Vidura then voices his disapproval to the king, and asks him to avoid the confrontation. He says, "act in such a way that a division does not occur among your sons because of the dice."[18] The dicing match is then referred to as "the cause of the destruction of the earth."[19]

I am taking *kalidvāra* to mean the door to conflict, or, the beginning of conflict, as I think this is the interpretation warranted by the context. Tensions had been mounting, and Vidura could clearly see that if the dicing match took place, a large-scale conflict would be inevitable. It would deepen the antagonism between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, and would, ultimately, spell the destruction of the entire family, "the destruction of the earth," in the language of the Epic. Van Buitenen's translation of the *kali-*

dvāra phrase is "the gate of Kali was upon them," taking Kali to mean the god of gambling and discord, while Roy has "the arrival of Kali was at hand," which he seems to take as a reference to the yuga.[20] Dutt, on the other hand, is more explicit and translates "the arrival of Kali (yuga) is near at hand."[21]

The dicing match finally does take place, and Duryodhana, with the help of his crafty uncle Śakuni, defeats Yudhiṣṭhira by means of deception. The Pāṇḍavas then go into their twelve-year exile in the forest, and, while there, Arjuna refers to their situation as "the conflict/misfortune (*kali*) caused by the dicing."[22] This time, even Roy and Dutt, who tend to see allusions to the yugas when *kali* is mentioned, take this as a reference to the "dissensions" or the "troubles" caused by gambling.[23]

During the time that the Pāṇḍavas spend in the forest, Yudhiṣṭhira encounters a sage, a *ṛṣi* called Lomaśa, who predicts he will vanquish the Kauravas. He compares the conflict between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas to a former conflict between gods and demons that took place long ago in the yuga of the gods.[24] The gods followed dharma, while the demons did not, so good fortune went to the gods, and bad luck fell on the demons. Lomaśa elaborates further:

> Misfortune (*kali*) then overwhelmed the *daiteyas* and the *dānavas*,[25] who were overcome by bad luck, and whose minds were overpowered by pride.[26]

Thus affected by bad luck (*alakṣmī*) and misfortune (*kali*), the sage continues, they were completely destroyed.[27] The sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who are equally arrogant and foolish, shall suffer the same fate as the demons.[28]

It seems clear from the above passages that *kali*, in the sense of discord or misfortune (whether as an adjective or personified), is used in connection with the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. Furthermore, the term is used to describe Duryodhana, the greedy and power-thirsty son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra who, throughout the Epic, is blamed for the fratricidal conflict. But not only is Duryodhana said to be a *kali* person, he is also considered to be an incarnation of Kali which, in this case, surely must be

construed as an incarnation of the losing dice throw, or, at the very least, as a pun on both meanings: he is the incarnation of the losing throw as well as of misfortune and quarrel. After all, it was he who called the dicing match in order to strip the Pāṇḍavas of their claim to the throne and of their possessions. The fateful match in which Yudhiṣṭhira lost everything then became the immediate source of the conflict. "The dice game is the root of discord," says Vidura when trying to stop the match from continuing. "It leads to mutual dissension or to great war; as Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son, Duryodhana, resorts to it, he creates a terrible enmity."[29] And later, when war is imminent, Dhṛtarāṣṭra complains that: "the great destruction of the Kurus seems to have started with the gambling."[30]

This is how Duryodhana is described:

> King Duryodhana was born on earth from a portion of Kali. He was evil-spirited and evil-minded, and he was a disgrace to the Kurus.

> That worst of men (*kalipūruṣa*)[31] was hated by all the world; that lowest of men (*puruṣādhama*) destroyed all the earth. He inflamed the animosity into a great [conflict] that destroyed all beings.[32]

Towards the end of the war, when Saṃjaya tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra of all the dead, he explains:

> Indeed, best of the Bhāratas, time has killed everyone after placing Duryodhana at the head of [this] enmity, O Bhārata![33]

And after the war, when Vyāsa is comforting Dhṛtarāṣṭra, he tells the king that his son Duryodhana was a part of the cosmic scheme to lighten the burden of the earth. He was to cause the mutual killing of warriors at the great battle. He then explains:

> That son of yours, O King, is a part of Kali, and he was born in Gāndhārī's womb for the purpose of destroying the world.

> He was impatient, fickle, irascible and difficult to deal with. Because of fate, his brothers were born [to be] like him.

> His maternal uncle, Śakuni, and his great friend Karṇa, as well

as [other] kings, were born on earth for the purpose of destruction.[34]

The mention of Śakuni is especially relevant here, as it was he who, as a co-conspirator, played the fraudulent dicing match in Duryodhana's place. And it turns out that Śakuni, who is an expert at the dice game, is the incarnation of Dvāpara, the second-worst dice throw.[35] It seems fitting that Duryodhana, who was the cause of the conflict, and Śakuni, who helped him carry out his plans through a dicing match, are cast as incarnations of the two worst throws.[36] Duryodhana produced *kali*—that is to say discord, dissension and misfortune—among the Bhāratas. There is no need here to invoke the yugas when Kali and Dvāpara are mentioned.[37]

In fact, there is a story told in the third book, while the Pāṇḍavas are living in exile in the forest after losing the dicing match, in which Dvāpara and Kali—the dice throws—are personified. It is the well-known story of King Nala, told to Yudhiṣṭhira by the *ṛṣi* Bṛhadaśva when he complains about his misfortune. The sage explains how King Nala, who had suffered a similar fate, had been even more unhappy than Yudhiṣṭhira.

King Nala had recently married Damayantī when Kali, who had wanted to be the one to marry her, decides to enter Nala and possess him. He asks his companion, Dvāpara, to help him by entering a set of dice.[38] Possessed by Kali, Nala becomes a gambler and loses everything, except his wife, to his brother Puṣkara. After this defeat, Nala and Damayantī go off to the jungle where he eventually abandons her because he is still possessed by Kali.

After many adventures, Nala, who is now in the service of King Ṛtuparṇa and lives in disguise under the name of Bāhuka, is greatly impressed by the king's ability to calculate the number of nuts and leaves on a *vibhītaka* tree. Ṛtuparṇa declares himself to be an expert at counting and a knower of the secret of dice, and agrees to teach Nala the secret in exchange for Nala's knowledge of horsemanship. As soon as Nala learns the secret of the dice (*akṣahṛdaya*), Kali leaves his body and enters the *vibhītaka* tree, which then becomes infamous.[39] Nala is later reunited with Damayantī and he now defeats his brother Puṣkara at dice. After

this, Nala and Damayantī live in happiness. Bṛhadaśva then tells Yudhiṣṭhira that "this story is considered to bring about the de-struction of Kali/kali,"[40] and that by listening to it bad luck (alakṣmī) can be averted.[41] At the end, the ṛṣi teaches Yudhiṣṭhira the secret of the dice.[42]

In this story, Kali can be interpreted as the personification of both the impulse to gamble and of bad luck, but bad luck in gambling is, of course, ultimately equal to the losing throw. Kali and Dvāpara here conspire together against Nala, just as Duryodhana and Śakuni (who are the incarnations of Kali and Dvāpara respectively), had conspired against Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas. In both cases the main player is Kali, while Dvāpara helps him by taking control of the dice. One might even say that, in a sense, Duryodhana 'forced' Yudhiṣṭhira to play the game, in the same way that Kali possessed Nala and made him play.[43]

An important mention of the dice throws is to be found in the Virāṭa Parvan,[44] when the Pāṇḍavas are living in the court of the Matsya king Virāṭa during their thirteenth, and last, year in exile. The Kauravas are considering taking up arms against their Pāṇḍava cousins, but Aśvatthāman disagrees. He knows that Ar-juna, with his powerful bow Gāṇḍīva, is a formidable adversary. Aśvatthāman mocks the way in which the kingdom had previ-ously been won by the Kauravas: not by honorable fighting, but by deceit at a game of dice. Why not bring Śakuni and let him win again with the dice, he declares sarcastically, for:

Gāṇḍīva does not throw dice, whether Kṛta or Dvāpara. Gāṇḍīva throws blazing, sharp, hard arrows.[45]

The matter, then, can no longer be settled with dice throws; this time it would have to be in real combat. This mention of the dice throws can probably throw light on the following passage, which appears in the next book, the Udyoga Parvan, when Kṛṣṇa de-scribes to Karṇa what it will be like when the great war starts:

6. When, in the battle, you see the one of white horses (Arjuna), whose charioteer is Kṛṣṇa, using the weapons of Indra and those of Agni and Māruta,

7. and [when you hear] the loud twang of Gāṇḍīva, like the crack of lightning; there will then be no Tretā, no Kṛta and no Dvāpara.

8. When, in the battle, you see Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Kuntī, whispering sacrificial prayers and protecting his great army,

9. unassailable like the Sun, destroying the enemy army; there will then be no Tretā, no Kṛta and no Dvāpara.

10. When, in the battle, you see the strong Bhīmasena dancing defiantly after drinking Duḥśāsana's blood,

11. like an elephant in rut after killing an enemy elephant; there will then be no Tretā, no Kṛta and no Dvāpara.

12. When, in the battle, you see the two great warrior sons of Mādrī (Nakula and Sahadeva) jolting the army of the Dhārtarāṣṭras like two elephants,

13. destroying the chariots of enemy heroes while immersed in the confrontation; there will then be no Tretā, no Kṛta and no Dvāpara.

14. When, in the battle, you see Droṇa, Śāṃtanava (Bhīṣma), Kṛpa, King Suyodhana (Duryodhana) and Jayadratha, [the king] of the Sindhus,

15. quickly approaching the battle, and stopped by the ambidextrous archer (Arjuna); there will then be no Tretā, no Kṛta and no Dvāpara.[46]

This is an interesting passage, and the terms Tretā, Kṛta and Dvāpara can be interpreted in different ways. What I consider to be the most reasonable explanation is to understand the passage in terms of the verse quoted earlier, when Aśvatthāman uses the names of the dice throws to mock the way in which they had won the kingdom. As in that case, this passage is probably saying that, this time around, the battle is to be fought with weapons, not dice, the implication being that the Kauravas stand no chance of winning. They will surely lose. Which is, of course, what ultimately happens, and it is significant that towards the end of the battle, Bhīma, having dealt mortal blows to Duryodhana, trium-

phantly utters these words:

> We do not use humiliation, fire, dice games and cheating; we
> destroy our enemies with the strength of our arms.[47]

Our passage can also simply (or simultaneously) mean that all
good fortune will vanish for the Kauravas once the battle starts,
and all that will be left for them is *kali*, that is bad luck and mis-
fortune. Dicing terminology is used to indicate that disaster lies
ahead. In the verses following this passage, Karṇa himself ac-
knowledges that the Pāṇḍavas will surely win and describes omi-
nous portents and a dream to that effect. Kṛṣṇa then closes by
saying that "the destruction of the earth is now certainly near."[48]
By "the destruction of the earth" we must understand, as in other
passages, the destruction of the Kauravas, or, in a more general
sense, of the Bhāratas, meaning both the Kauravas and the
Pāṇḍavas along with their allies.

The interesting thing about this passage is that translators have,
as a matter of course, taken it to refer to the yugas, following the
traditional assumption that the beginning of the Kali Yuga was
marked by the great Bhārata war (although, as was mentioned
earlier, the Purāṇas turn this into the more precise statement that
it was the death of Kṛṣṇa, the *avatāra*, that signaled the dawn of
the new yuga). So, Roy's translation renders the refrain line
"there will then be no Tretā, no Kṛta and no Dvāpara," as "then
all signs of the Kṛta, the Tretā, and the Dvāpara ages will disap-
pear."[49] Van Buitenen's translation only inserts the word 'Age'
once—after the first mention of Kṛta—thus translating "then there
will be no more Kṛta Age, no more Tretā, no more Dvāpara."
Although in the following repetitions of the verse he omits the
term 'Age,' that one mention implies that the whole passage
should be taken to mean that the first three yugas have passed,
and Kali will now begin.[50] The word yuga is not present in the
Sanskrit text, and there is nothing in the context to indicate that
the yugas are meant.[51] But even if a connection to the yugas were
warranted, and I think it is not—we should then also consider the
possibility of a pun on both meanings, the dice throws and the
yugas—it would still be necessary to know how the yugas should

be understood here.

In any case, what is in evidence here is a predisposition on the part of translators to read the classical yugas into the text, based partly on the Epic itself, but mainly on Purāṇic and later tradition.[52] This is somewhat surprising in the case of van Buitenen, who, in the introduction to this very Parvan, while criticizing Biardeau's ahistorical approach to the *Mahābhārata*, warns against the pitfalls of laying a 'Purāṇa-Hindū' interpretation upon the Epic.[53] It illustrates the degree to which the yugas are considered to be inseparable from the *Mahābhārata*. Another instance of this is the verse mentioned earlier which talks of the approaching door to conflict (*kalidvāra*), while referring to the imminent conflict between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. There too, one could, from a Purāṇic perspective, read the yugas into the text, and construe this as another prophetic statement announcing the ominous arrival of the Kali Yuga, as Roy seems to have done, and as Dutt clearly did.[54]

We will now review an important external confirmation of the use of the names of the dice throws for describing the relative merit of something, and for indicating good or bad fortune. It comes from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, a text which could be of particular relevance in connection with the Epic. Its period of composition, estimated by Keith as probably not later than 600 B.C.E.,[55] places it roughly at the time of the earliest strata of the *Mahābhārata*. And it was apparently composed during the heyday of the rule of King Janamejaya Parikṣita.[56] Now, Janamejaya Parikṣita is, according to the Epic, the great-grandson of Arjuna, and the king at whose snake-sacrifice the *Mahābhārata* was recited.

The *Aitareya* relates the story of Śunaḥśepa, and within the story it describes how a young boy named Rohita was instructed by the god Indra to wander in the forest and not return to his village.[57] Once a year Rohita returned and, each time, was again admonished by Indra to keep wandering in the forest. This happens five times, and on each occasion Indra exhorts him with a

verse. After the third and fourth years, the god pronounces the two verses that are of interest to us here. They can be quoted together, as they are clearly two expressions of the same idea:

> The fortune (*bhaga*) of one who is sitting down, sits down; that of one who is standing, stands up. That of one who is lying down, lies down; the fortune of one who keeps moving, moves.

> Lying down one becomes Kali; getting up, Dvāpara. Standing, one becomes Tretā; by moving, one becomes Kṛta.[58]

These verses provide evidence that at a time when the *Mahābhārata* was in its early stages of development, and in a milieu intimately related to the Epic's story, the names of the four dice throws were used for indicating good or bad fortune, and for rating the worth or merit of something on a fourfold scale. It is, therefore, not surprising to find them so used in the Epic, where, in addition, the game of dice plays such a prominent role.[59] We shall return to these verses later on, when we look into the connection between the king and the yugas.

Kali in Early Buddhist Literature: The Pali Canon

Another important external source for establishing the current usage of the word *kali* at the time of the Epic's composition is the collection of Buddhist texts written in Pali. This collection is generally considered to include the earliest of Buddhist writings, and to have been composed at about the same time as some strata of the Epic, probably in the early centuries B.C.E.[60] In these texts, *kali* is used with all of the meanings illustrated above for the *Mahābhārata*. The term stands for the losing dice throw as well as evil, misfortune, destruction, bad luck, defeat, and anything considered wrong or false.

According to the *Sutta Nipāta*, one of the oldest texts in the Pali Canon,[61] the Buddha once said these words with regards to a monk (*bhikku*) who was criticizing other disciples:

> The person who praises someone worthy of blame, or blames someone worthy of praise, gathers *kali* (evil) by his words.[62] Be-

cause of such *kali* he finds no happiness.

> The *kali* by which one loses everything—including oneself—at dice is insignificant [compared to] the great *kali* of finding fault in the righteous.[63]

A few lines later, the Buddha is said to list several negative adjectives that describe unworthy people doomed to hell; among them are *purisanta* and *kali*, translated by Norman respectively as "lowest of men" and "wicked."[64] These same words, as we have seen, are used together in the *Mahābhārata* to describe Duryodhana.[65]

In the *Anguttara Nikāya*, *kali* is used in the sense of something wrong or false.[66] And in the *Dhammapada*, the following comparison is made: "there is no fire like passion; there is no *kali* (evil) like hatred."[67] Similarly, in a Jātaka story it is told how a treacherous chameleon caused the *kali* (destruction) of an entire family of large lizards. Although the meaning seems evident from the context, the commentator expressly points out that *kali* is here synonymous with destruction.[68]

Kali as the losing throw is mentioned, for example, in the *Dhammapada* and the *Dīgha Nikāya*.[69] In this respect, there is another interesting usage in the Pali texts, one obviously derived from the dice game. The opposition between *kṛta* and *kali* is employed to denote the contrast between victory and defeat, between good luck and bad luck. In one of the Jātaka stories, a man called Bījaka complains about his fate, as he was born to a prostitute despite being a good man in his previous birth. He compares his luck to that of Alāta, who had a high birth even though he had harmed many animals in his previous life. Both men agree that good and bad actions bear no fruit, everything is predestined and simply a matter of fate, *niyati*, which here would probably be better rendered as chance. Bījaka says:

> I, indeed, get only *kali* (misfortune), like an unskilled gambler; [while] Alāta gets *kṛta* (good fortune), like an able gambler.[70]

The *kṛta–kali* opposition is also conveyed by the use of the terms *kaliggaha* and *kaṭaggaha*. The compound *kaliggaha* literally means

"holder of *kali*," and could be translated as "the one of bad fortune" or "the loser." It appears in the expression *ubhayattha kaliggaha*, "doing badly in both places," that is, in this world and in the next.[71] The opposite of *kaliggaha* is *kataggaha*, "holder of *kṛta*," which can then be rendered as "the lucky one" or "the winner." [72] It is used in the equivalent phrase *ubhayattha kataggaha*, "lucky in both worlds."[73]

Lastly, the term *kali*, when combined with words derived from the verbal root *grah*, to hold or grasp, conveys the idea of having bad luck or losing. So, to hold *kali* means to have bad luck or to lose, and the compound *kaliggaha* refers, as just mentioned, to someone of bad luck or a loser.[74]

Significantly, *kali* is rarely, if ever, used in the Pali texts with reference to the yugas, in contrast with its widespread use to denote the losing dice throw, bad luck, evil, destruction, or anything considered negative.

The Term Yugānta

The word *yugānta*, "the end of the yuga," or its equivalent *yugakṣaya*, "the destruction of the yuga," appears frequently in the *Mahābhārata* but, contrary to what might be expected, it is not used for indicating when the action of the Epic takes place. Rather, the word is almost invariably used for making comparisons to *yugānta*, which have to be understood as comparisons to a mythological 'end of the world.' Comparisons to the end of the yuga become a standard device for describing something deemed to be awe-inspiring, terrible and devastating.

These comparisons are mainly concentrated in the 'battle books' (Parvans six to ten), so called because they deal with all the details of the great war, and among them, they are to be found especially in the Droṇa Parvan,[75] although the book immediately preceding it, the Bhīṣma Parvan, also contains a significant number. They are also used, to a limited extent, in some of the other books. The destruction at the time of *yugānta* turns out to be a very productive metaphor that is used to poetic advantage

as heroes, weapons, battles and other happenings are described as resembling the cataclysmic events that take place at the end of the yuga.

In order to perceive the full force of the comparison, and to see how prevalent it is, let us now review the different *ways in which* it is used. Some of the heroes are compared to time and death at the end of the yuga. Bhīma, after Yudhiṣṭhira's defeat at the dicing match and the ensuing humiliation of the Pāṇḍavas, becomes enraged and his face is like that of death at yugānta.[76] During the battle, he goes about killing everyone "like time at yugānta;"[77] wielding his mace, he looked as terrible as "time at the end of the yuga."[78] Arjuna also killed many in battle, like time at the end of the yuga.[79] Duryodhana, on his part, warns that when he fights Arjuna his prowess will be shown to be like that of time at the end of the yuga.[80] Aśvatthāman is also said to kill enemies "as does death, sent forth by time, at yugānta,"[81] and even Bhīṣma is described as being like time at *yugakṣaya*.[82]

When Bhīma and Duryodhana are engaged in a wrestling match they are described as two seas at yugānta,[83] and the two armies at the great battle resembled two oceans clashing at yugānta.[84] And even the loud sound of several attacking Kaurava warriors seemed "like the sound of oceans at the end of the yuga."[85]

Two other interesting images resorted to are clouds and lightning. The Kaurava army looks "like the stream of clouds at yugānta,"[86] and the warrior Ghaṭotkaca roars in rage, "like a cloud at yugānta."[87] When a powerful weapon is struck down and falls, "it terrifies all beings, like a thunderbolt at yugānta."[88] Likewise, wounded elephants fall to the ground "like mountains shattered by lightning at the end of the yuga."[89] In a similar vein, certain weapons are said to be like meteors or comets appearing at yugānta.[90] Another motif is that of a river made by the blood and body parts of the warriors slain by Arjuna,[91] or by Droṇa;[92] it resembles the one made by time at yugānta.

And there are yet other motifs. On one occasion, Yudhiṣṭhira finds that his brothers have collapsed, and they are said to look

like the fallen guardians of the four quarters, the *lokapālas*, at yugānta.[93] And Arjuna, after vowing to kill Jayadratha, blows his conch, causing the whole world to shake as if at the end of the yuga.[94] Again, both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa blow their conches and their sound terrifies the Kauravas:

> That very loud sound, King, filled all the directions; it terrified the troops as if the end of the yuga were in full swing.[95]

When the five Pāṇḍavas attacked the *rākṣasa* Alambusa, the simile is drawn from astrology: the demon was "overpowered... like the Moon [is overpowered] by the five planets at the terrible end of the yuga."[96] There is even a comparison that conveys an image of beauty. After many *rākṣasas* had been conquered, the earth looked beautiful, strewn with all the implements of war, "like the sky at the end of the yuga, with risen Suns and Moons, and strewn with planets."[97]

One of the favorite comparisons is to the majestic, brilliant, shining Sun at the end of the yuga. Kṛṣṇa's powerful discus, Sudarśana, flies through the air resembling the Sun at yugānta.[98] Arjuna's banner was also "like the shining Sun at yugānta;"[99] and so were the banners of the Kurus, as they illuminated the troops "like the Sun at yugānta."[100] Arjuna himself is compared to the Sun at the end of the yuga,[101] and so is his bow, Gāṇḍīva: when stretched, its arrows are comparable to the Sun's rays.[102] Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa together were "like two suns at yugānta;"[103] but, then again, so were Kṛtavarman and Śikhaṇḍin when they engaged in combat.[104] Even Aśvatthāman shone like the Sun at yugānta, after he had killed many *rākṣasas*.[105] On the other hand, when the wise Bhīṣma lay dead on his bed of arrows, he was like the Sun fallen from the sky at yugānta.[106]

The most common comparison, by far, is to the devastating fire that burns everything at the end of the yuga. So Arjuna, about to engage in battle, was:

> ...like the terrible destroyer, like Vāsava (Indra) with the thunderbolt; like staff-wielding, unbearable death, impelled by time.

> Like the trident-wielding Akṣobhya (Śiva), like Varuṇa with his

noose; like the flaming fire that will burn all creatures at yugānta.[107]

And elsewhere:

Arjuna burned all the Kurus with the heat of his weapon, like the fire that breaks out at yugānta [burns] all beings.[108]

Bhīṣma was also "like the fire at the end of the yuga;"[109] and Karṇa was "bright like the fire at yugānta, and firm like the Himalayas."[110] Śikhaṇḍin confronted Droṇa like the fire at yugānta,"[111] but elsewhere Droṇa himself is equaled to the fire at yugānta.[112]

And so is Yudhiṣṭhira:

Then Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, burned with anger, like the fire that will burn all beings at the end of the yuga.[113]

Aśvatthāman, after the night raid on the Pāṇḍava camp, shone "like the fire that has turned all beings to ashes at yugānta."[114] He burns his enemies with arrows, just as fire burns beings at the end of the yuga;[115] and the same words, almost verbatim, are used of Karṇa.[116] Aśvatthāman, again, attacks the Pāṇḍavas with a powerful fiery weapon that burns their troops "like the *saṃvartaka* fire burns all beings at the end of the yuga."[117]

I must point out that the destructive fire of the end of the yuga is generally associated with time. The *saṃvartaka* fire, which in the verse just quoted is said to be the fire of destruction at the end of the yuga, is merely an expression of the fire of time (*kālāgni*).[118] Just as time destroys all individual beings, it also, ultimately, consumes everything at the end of the world, or, shall we now say, at the end of time. So, when Bhīṣma praises Śakuni as a warrior, he says that in battle he shall "move about like time," angry "like the fire at the end of the yuga."[119] Likewise, when Śiśupāla insults Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma becomes enraged like time about to burn down all creatures at yugānta.[120] And, during the battle, Bhīma attacked "like the fire at the end of the yuga," killing everyone "like time at yugānta."[121] Karṇa, when ready to fight, is said to have been set loose like the fire at the end of the

yuga is set loose by time.[122]

There are many more instances of these comparisons to yugānta in the *Mahābhārata*, but all the previous examples should suffice to make it abundantly clear that what is intended is just that: a comparison.[123] There are even some cases where instead of the comparison being used for heroes or weapons, the Epic conflict itself and its aftermath are directly compared to the end of the yuga. Consider the following description of the war given by Saṃjaya:

> When the fierce, hair-raising battle was going on, Bhārata, it was like the end of the yuga, when a violent destruction of the world takes place.[124]

So it was not the end of the yuga, it was merely *like* the end of the yuga: the devastation was such that it resembled the end of the world.

When Bhīṣma wreaks havoc among the Pāṇḍavas, he is "as if producing the end of the yuga in Yudhiṣṭhira's army."[125] And later, as Dhṛtarāṣṭra laments the death of Bhīṣma and Droṇa, he blames time and destiny, and compares their deaths to a change of yuga:

> Like a change of yuga, like a delusion of the worlds, O dear one, is the killing of Bhīṣma and of the noble Droṇa.[126]

Similarly, when the Kaurava women hear of the death of their warriors, they are terribly distraught:

> Holding arms they mourned their sons, brothers and fathers, as if displaying the destruction of the world at the end of the yuga.[127]

They cried aloud with a sound that reached all the worlds:

> All the beings [that heard them] thought: 'this is destruction, like the burning of beings at the time of the end of the yuga.'[128]

One of the women, Somadatta's wife, grieves over her slain son and addresses her dead husband, killed earlier in the war, with these words:

Fortunately, great King, you do not see this cruel destruction of the Bhāratas, this awful war of the Kurus, this end of the yuga.[129]

Many years after the war, Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself dies in the forest, along with his wife Gāndhārī and with Kuntī, the mother of Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna and Bhīma. On hearing the news of their passing, "the five Pāṇḍavas were as afflicted with sorrow as all beings at the end of the yuga."[130]

There are only a few places in which yugānta is used without an explicit indication that it is meant as a comparison. One of them is the description, mentioned earlier, of the river of blood caused by Arjuna. In a note to that passage I have already discussed the matter. Another is the verse just quoted, in which Somadatta's wife laments the death of her son. In the latter case, it is clear that the term is meant as a metaphor. She is talking to her dead husband and tells him he is lucky not to witness the destruction of the Bhāratas, to which she metaphorically refers as the end of the world, that is, the end of the yuga.

Likewise, on one occasion, Yudhiṣṭhira proclaims that Bhīma will be so fierce in battle that "he will display the end of the yuga."[131] In what is another example, Arjuna had earlier engaged in a long tirade warning that, should war break out, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his sons would regret having started the conflict and facing the powerful Pāṇḍavas. As part of his warning, he says:

When I burn the Kauraveyas like fire, destroying the flocks of assembled demons, establishing another yuga at the end of the yuga; then Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his sons will be sorry.[132]

This, again, I believe should be taken as a metaphor. Arjuna is comparing himself to fire, and he will destroy the demons (presumably the Kauravas and their allies) and start a new era, just as the fire at yugānta destroys everything, thus preparing the way for a new yuga to begin. The commentator Nīlakaṇṭha clearly understands Arjuna's statement metaphorically. In his interpretation, Arjuna's words would run something like this:

When I burn the Kauraveyas like fire, destroying the flocks of

assembled demons and establishing a time when dharma will prevail as the enemies are destroyed; then Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his sons will be sorry.[133]

It goes without saying that, if Nīlakaṇṭha's interpretation is correct, Arjuna could hardly be speaking of the beginning of the terrible adharmic Kali Yuga when he talks of a time when dharma will prevail.

The only other relevant instance I have found of the use of yugānta without an explicit indication that it is meant as a comparison, is not far from these last two. Before the war, as Kṛṣṇa is preparing to meet with Duryodhana in an attempt to avert the conflict, Bhīma encourages him to use diplomacy because Duryodhana is a difficult person to deal with. He is treacherous, impulsive and a liar. Bhīma then recites the names of eighteen kings who had destroyed their own families; they were the lowest of men,[134] and were born at yugānta. He continues:

> And so our own Duryodhana of the Kurus, created by time at the end of the yuga; he is the ruin of the family, the worst, an evil man.[135]

In this case, as in the previous one, I believe the mention of the end of the yuga should probably be taken as a metaphor for the terrible destruction of the entire family. Reading it as a metaphor is consistent with the way in which the term yugānta is used throughout the Epic: as a point of comparison for something awe-inspiring and devastating.

At this point, I must mention that a comparison to yugānta similar to those in the *Mahābhārata* appears in what is considered to be the first important inscription in Sanskrit, an inscription of the Śaka King Rudradāman I dated in the year 150 C.E. It refers to an ancient Mauryan dam which burst open "because of a wind of terrible speed as that at the end of the yuga (*yuganidhana*)."[136] Likewise, in the commentary to one of the Buddhist Jātaka tales, the Pali term *yugantavāta*, "the wind at yugānta," is used. The *Pali-English Dictionary* defines the compound as "storm at the end of an age," or "whirlwind," clearly taking it as a metaphor.[137]

There are also comparisons to yugānta in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, similar to the comparisons of weapons and heroes found in the *Mahābhārata*.[138] All of this confirms that these are mere metaphors, with no ultimate significance. They are comparisons, not descriptions.

After all the examples of the preceding pages, it is now clear that the term yugānta is not used for placing the Epic's events at a particular moment in the yuga scheme—in this case, the end of the Dvāpara Yuga and the beginning of the Kali Yuga—it is merely used as a narrative device, a powerful image intended to impress on the audience the awesome and terrifying nature of the thing described.[139] It is a way of evoking what was evidently considered a familiar image for the listener of the Epic poem. What, then, is that image?

The comparisons themselves give us a large part of the answer. It is a time of great destruction, caused mainly by natural forces: torrential rains, implied by the rolling clouds and the thunder; earthquakes, hinted at by the shaking produced by Arjuna's conch as well as by the fallen guardians of the quarters; terrible winds, if we include the mention in Rudradāman's inscription;[140] and an intense, resplendent Sun; but most of all fire, an all-consuming fire that destroys everything. There are also comets or meteors, as well as negative planetary configurations.

The image of the end of the yuga, then, refers to the end of a cosmic cycle that brings with it great destruction. In the Epic, as well as in later texts, this destruction is often associated with the god Rudra (Śiva), who is sometimes said to have created the world, and to whom it is to return at the end of the yuga.[141] He is said to rage at yugānta.[142] It is, therefore, not surprising that Arjuna, responding to a question of Yudhiṣṭhira's, asserts that he can quickly kill the enemy because he has the missile that Paśupati (Śiva) uses at yugānta for destroying every creature.[143]

This destruction at yugānta, which clearly does not refer to the transition between one individual yuga and the next, seems to allude either to an undefined long period of time, or to the end of the cycle of all four yugas (Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali) taken

as a whole. The four yugas taken together are commonly referred
to as a yuga, what the Purāṇas would call the mahāyuga, the
great yuga, or the *caturyuga*, the fourfold yuga.

There is, however, another confusion here, because in the
Purāṇas—as well as in many Epic passages—this end of the
world is said to take place not at the end of a single fourfold
yuga, but only after a full cycle of one thousand such fourfold
yugas has elapsed, and this period was to be called a kalpa or a
day of Brahmā.

The Epic comparisons to yugānta, as well as that of Ru-
dradāman's rock inscription, probably reflect an early stage in the
formation of Hindu cosmogonic theories, a stage in which some
kind of destruction caused by the forces of nature, and generally
attributed to Śiva,[144] was thought to take place at the end of the
fourfold mahāyuga.[145] This moment of world destruction was then
transferred to the end of not one, but one thousand mahāyugas.
The *Mahābhārata*, in fact, in several places speaks of the yuga as
a cycle of creation and destruction. Besides the references quoted
above, it variously talks of Viṣṇu sleeping at the beginning of the
yuga (something he does between kalpas according to the
Purāṇas),[146] of all beings being created from him at the beginning
of the first yuga and returning to him at the end of the yuga,[147]
and of Vāsudeva (Kṛṣṇa) creating the world yuga after yuga (*yuge
yuge*).[148] Actually, in some of the very first introductory verses of
the Epic, creation and destruction are said to take place at the
beginning and the end of the yuga.[149] There is even an unusual
verse in the Śānti Parvan that states that a yuga of twelve thou-
sand years (i.e. the mahāyuga) is a kalpa, and a thousand kalpas
are a day of Brahmā.[150] This is in clear conflict with the com-
monly held view that a kalpa equals not one, but one thousand
mahāyugas, and it seems to indicate that the cycle of four
yugas—considered as a period of creation and destruction—could
have been identified with the kalpa even before the cycle was ex-
panded to include one thousand mahāyugas.

We can now briefly summarize our main conclusions concerning

the use of yugānta in the *Mahābhārata*:

    1. The term yugānta, when used alone, does not refer to the end of a particular yuga, but to the end of either an unspecified long period of time, or the end of all four yugas: Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali. It is used in a formulaic manner, in the locative case (*yugānte*).

    2. Major natural disasters take place at yugānta, and it is considered to be the end of the world, when everything is destroyed. It corresponds to the Purāṇic kalpānta.

    3. When used in connection with Epic events and heroes, the term is generally meant as a metaphor for the destruction of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, or as a device for emphasizing the awe-inspiring nature of weapons, heroic acts or other happenings. It is not used for placing the destruction of the Bhāratas at a particular moment in the classical yuga cycle.

Notes

[1] There are other opinions as to exactly when the Kali Yuga began, but they are all associated with the *Mahābhārata* war and its aftermath.

[2] A few scholars (e.g., Poddar 1979: 216, Varma 1979: 142) have occasionally suggested that the yuga theory is not crucial to the Epic, but this is not the generalized view.

[3] Karve 1969:217; I have provided the diacritical marks.

[4] Book 17.

[5] Book 16.

[6] Book 18.

[7] The notion that the Pāṇḍavas embark on their final journey when they realize that the Kali Yuga has begun is probably derived from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1.15.36-37), a text that is centuries later than the *Mbh*. The Purāṇa says that Kali began when Kṛṣṇa died, and points out that Kali is the cause of adharma. It immediately states that when Yudhiṣṭhira perceived a rise in adharma—presumably caused by the onset of the Kali Yuga—he decided to leave this world. In other words, by saying that Yudhiṣṭhira noticed that adharma was on the

risc, the *BhP* is indirectly asserting that he realized that the Kali Yuga
had arrived, and this prompted him and his brothers to abandon the
world. That this passage of the *BhP* has influenced later scholars is
evident by the fact that Shukla and Sarma (1976:10), in their transla-
tion of the *Āryabhaṭīya*, cite it as scriptural authority for asserting that
Yudhiṣṭhira abandoned the world when he became aware of the arrival
of the Kali Yuga.

[8] Book 12.

[9] *aśaraṇyaḥ prajānāṃ yaḥ sa rajā kalir ucyate //* 12.12.27.

[10] 12.12.29.

[11] *kaliṃ putrapravādena saṃjaya tvām ajījanām,* 5.131.27.

[12] White (1989:301, note 76) quotes an Epic passage (13.127.15–16) in
which broken vessels are said to be inauspicious (*apraśasta*) because
there is *kali* in them, or because Kali is in them: "they say there is *kali*
in broken vessels" (*bhinnabhāṇḍe kaliṃ prāhuḥ*). The entire chapter in
which these verses occur is not part of the Critical Edition, they appear
in Book 13, Appendix 1, No. 14, lines 306–308 (13.127 in Roy's
translation, 13.127.16–17 in Dutt's). White was probably using the
Bombay edition.

[13] Book 5.

[14] *yuddhe kṛṣṇa kalir nityam,* 5.70.49. In Roy's text it is at 5.72; Dutt's
translation (5.72.50) is similar.

[15] ...*'smān upāvṛttaḥ kalir mahān,* 5.151.21.

[16] Roy (5.155) is more cautious here; he translates: "...great calamity
overtaketh us..."

[17] *tac chrutvā viduro dhīmān kalidvāram upasthitam / vināśamukham utpan-
nam dhṛtarāṣṭram upādravat //* 2.45.50.

[18] *putrair bhedo yathā na syād dyūtahetos tathā kuru //* 2.45.52.

[19] *mūlam...vināśasya pṛthivyā,* 2.46.3.

[20] 2.49 in Roy's text. He probably means the yuga, see below, note 49
and the text it goes with.

[21] 2.49.52 in Dutt's text.

[22] *dyūtajam kalim,* 3.171.9.

[23] Roy: "dissensions" (3.173); Dutt: "troubles" (3.174.9).

[24] *devayuga,* 3.92.6. Note that "yuga" can here be taken simply as "age"

or "time" in a general sense. The reference can be to an unspecified, mythical "age of the gods."

[25] Two kinds of demons.

[26] *tān alakṣmīsamāviṣṭān darpopahatacetasaḥ / daiteyān dānavāṃś caiva kalir apy āviśat tataḥ //* 3.92.10. Van Buitenen: "invaded by discord," Roy (3.94): "Kali sought to possess them;" Dutt (3.94.11) follows Roy.

[27] 3.92.11–12.

[28] 3.92.22. The whole story is in 3.92.

[29] *dyūtaṃ mūlaṃ kalahasyānupāti mithobhedāya mahate vā raṇāya / yadāsthito 'yaṃ dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putro duryodhanaḥ sṛjate vairam ugram //* 2.56.1.

[30] *dyūtapramukham ābhāti kurūṇāṃ vyasanaṃ mahat,* 5.50.57.

[31] Or "that man of discord/dissension/quarrel."

[32] *kaler aṃśāt tu saṃjajñe bhuvi duryodhano nṛpaḥ / durbuddhir durmatiś caiva kurūṇām ayaśaskaraḥ // jagato yaḥ sa sarvasya vidviṣṭaḥ kalipūruṣaḥ / yaḥ sarvāṃ ghātayām āsa pṛthivīṃ puruṣādhamaḥ / yena vairaṃ samuddīptaṃ bhūtāntakaraṇaṃ mahat //* 1.61.80–81.

[33] *kālena nihataṃ sarvaṃ jagad vai bhāratarṣabha / duryodhanaṃ vai purataḥ kṛtvā vairasya bhārata //* 9.1.36.

[34] *sa eṣa te suto rājaṃl lokasaṃhārakāraṇāt / kaler aṃśaḥ samutpanno gāndhāryā jaṭhare nṛpa // amarṣī capalaś cāpi krodhano dusprasādhanaḥ / daivayogāt samutpannā bhrātaraś cāsya tādṛśāḥ // śakunir mātulaś caiva karṇaś ca paramaḥ sakhā / samutpannā vināśārthaṃ pṛthivyāṃ sahitā nṛpāḥ //* 11.8.27–29.

[35] "Know the one called Śakuni to be Dvāpara," *śakunir nāma yas...dvāparam viddhi tam...,* 1.61.72. "Know that Duryodhana is Kali, and Śakuni is Dvāpara," *kaliṃ duryodhanaṃ viddhi śakuniṃ dvāparaṃ tathā,* 15.39.10. When Śakuni died he "went to Dvāpara," *dvāparaṃ śakuniḥ prāpa,* 18.5.18.

[36] The Epic makes it clear that Śakuni is closely connected with gambling and cheating by referring to him as Kitava, "the gambler/cheater" (1.2.101; 7.33.20). And another name of Śakuni's son, Ulūka, is Kaitava or Kaitavya, a patronymic meaning "the son of the gambler/cheater."

[37] I must, therefore, disagree with Biardeau (1976:148, 155, 157; followed by Hiltebeitel 1990:94, 97), who takes it for granted that Duryodhana and Śakuni are incarnations of the yugas, although she

later (1985:90, 207) seems to have distanced herself somewhat from this equation by saying that it is only secondary, while their role as incarnations of the dice throws is more important. She also (1986:20–21) draws a comparison between Duryodhana and "the *asura* Kali," who usurped Indra's throne in heaven; from that point on, she refers to Duryodhana as Duryodhana-Kali. I am unable to find any textual reference to such a demon (*asura*), who, by the description, would sound more like Bali. The *Mbh* does, actually, compare Duryodhana to Bali at one point: he shall lose the kingdom, just as Bali once did (5.38.44). Later, when Bali is mentioned at 5.72.12, the Critical Edition reports that several manuscripts read Kali instead of Bali. Could this be the source of Biardeau's unusual statement?

[38] 3.55.

[39] 3.70.27, 34, 36. It is the nuts of the *vibhītaka* tree that were used as dice.

[40] *itihāsam idaṃ cāpi kalināśanam ucyate*, 3.78.10.

[41] 3.78.12. It was precisely *kali* (in the sense of misfortune) and *alakṣmī* (bad luck), that precipitated the fall of the demons in the story told to Yudhiṣṭhira by the *ṛṣi* Lomaśa, to which I referred earlier.

[42] The story of Nala is 3.50–78.

[43] According to van Buitenen (1975:185), the story of Nala is extant in several folk versions, but the dicing is not included in all of them. He, therefore, suggests the possibility that an early version did not include the dicing, and that its inclusion was an innovation on the part of the *Mahābhārata*. If this is so, it makes sense to assume that whoever adapted the story to the Epic by comparing Yudhiṣṭhira to Nala, and by including the dicing, understood Duryodhana and Śakuni to be the incarnations of dice throws, not of yugas. Otherwise, there would be no clear parallelism between them and the Kali-Dvāpara pair in Nala's story, and the story would not blend as easily into the Epic.

[44] Book 4.

[45] *nākṣān kṣipati gāṇḍīvaṃ na kṛtaṃ dvāparam na ca / jvalato niśitān bāṇāṃs tīkṣṇān kṣipati gāṇḍīvam //* 4.45.23.

[46] 6. *yadā drakṣyasi saṃgrāme śvetāśvaṃ kṛṣṇasārathim / aindram astraṃ vikurvāṇam ubhe caivāgnimārute //* 7. *gāṇḍīvasya ca nirghoṣaṃ visphurjitam ivāśaneḥ / na tadā bhavitā tretā na kṛtaṃ dvāparam na ca //* 8. *yadā drakṣyasi saṃgrāme kuntīputraṃ yudhiṣṭhiram / japahomasamāyuktaṃ svāṃ*

rakṣantaṃ mahācamūm // 9. ādityam iva durdharṣaṃ tapantaṃ śatruvāhinīm / na tadā bhavitā tretā na kṛtaṃ dvāparaṃ na ca // 10. yadā drakṣyasi saṃgrāme bhīmasenaṃ mahābalam / duḥśāsanasya rudhiraṃ pītvā nṛtyantam āhave // 11. prabhinnam iva mātaṅgaṃ pratidviradaghātinam / na tadā bhavitā tretā na kṛtaṃ dvāparaṃ na ca // 12. yadā drakṣyasi saṃgrāme mādrīputrau mahārathau / vāhinīṃ dhārtarāṣṭrāṇāṃ kṣobhayantau gajāv iva // 13. vigāḍhe śastrasaṃpāte paravīrarathārujau / na tadā bhavitā tretā na kṛtaṃ dvāparaṃ na ca // 14. yadā drakṣyasi saṃgrāme droṇaṃ śāṃtanavaṃ kṛpam / suyodhanaṃ ca rājānaṃ saindhavaṃ ca jayadratham // 15. yuddhāyāpatatas tūrṇaṃ vāritān savyasācinā / na tadā bhavitā tretā na kṛtaṃ dvāparaṃ na ca // 5.140.6-15.

[47] *nāsmākaṃ nikṛtir vahnir nākṣadyūtaṃ na vañcanā / svabāhubalam āśritya prabādhāmo vayaṃ ripūn //* 9.58.8.

[48] *upasthitavināśeyaṃ nūnam adya vasuṃdharā /* 5.141.43.

[49] Roy, at 5.142. After the first mention of the refrain, he adds: "(but, instead, Kali embodied will be present)." Dutt's version of the refrain is "then will the Tretā, Kṛta, and Dvāpara Yugas pass away." I have supplied the diacritical marks.

[50] Note that he also rearranged the order of the names, so as to list them in their normal descending fashion. Whether intentionally or not, this small detail reinforces the idea that a gradual decline is meant, and the last stage (the Kali Yuga) has been reached.

[51] Unless we want to go back almost 100 chapters to 5.47.59, where, in a long passage, Arjuna describes all the horrors the Kauravas will endure if war breaks out. As part of his long discourse he says he will destroy the Kauravas and start another yuga at yugānta. Or to 5.72.18, where Bhīma says that Duryodhana was brought by time in order to destroy the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas at yugānta. But, as we shall see in the next section, these descriptions should be taken as metaphors, and the term yugānta here does not allude to the end of the Dvāpara Yuga (as it should, if the ensuing beginning of the Kali Yuga were meant).

[52] The fact that Nīlakaṇṭha takes this passage as a reference to the yugas has surely influenced later readings of it, and it illustrates the need to be cautious when using the commentaries. Lüders ([1907] 1940:145) had already pointed out that Nīlakaṇṭha's reading in this case was surely incorrect.

[53] Van Buitenen 1978:144.

[54] There is an interesting example of Roy's predisposition to read the

arrival of the Kali Yuga into the text in his translation of CE 3.121.18–19. In a verse the intention of which is not entirely clear, the sage Lomaśa tells Yudhiṣṭhira that the Narmadā river is comparable to the *saṃdhi* between Tretā and Dvāpara. In his translation, Roy mistakenly mentions the *saṃdhi* between Tretā and Kali (an obvious impossibility), instead of that between Tretā and Dvāpara, and takes Lomaśa's statement as an assertion that they (Lomaśa and Yudhiṣṭhira) are living at the beginning of Kali. Dutt carries the same mistake into his translation, making one wonder whether he actually translated the verse or simply borrowed Roy's rendition of it.

[55] Keith [1920] 1981:42–45. The part of the text that interests us is considered by Keith (p. 49) to be among the later portions of the *Brāhmaṇa*, and of a period similar to that of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

[56] According to Keith (ibid., 44–45): "there is abundant evidence of the milieu which produced the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*: it was that of the Bharatas in the middle country, and at a time when the fame of Janamejaya was at its height. The Bharatas, the Kuru-Pañcālas with the Vaśas and the Uśīnaras are the inhabitants of the middle country... We are told of the consecration of Bharata Dauḥṣanti (*AB* 8.14) but the great king is Janamejaya Parikṣita..." The close connection between the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* and the Epic is further underscored by the affinity between the language of parts of the Brāhmaṇa and epic Sanskrit (Witzel 1995a:97). Witzel considers texts like the *Aitareya* and the *Śatapatha* Brāhmaṇas to be "like predecessors of the Epics, especially when they speak of the Parikṣita dynasty" (ibid.).

[57] There is a brief mention of Śunaḥśepa in the *Mbh* (13.3.6), but Rohita is not included.

[58] *āste bhaga āsīnasyordhvas tiṣṭhati tiṣṭhataḥ / śete nipadyamānasya carāti carato bhaga // kaliḥ śayāno bhavati saṃjihānas tu dvāparaḥ / uttiṣṭhaṃs tretā bhavati kṛtaṃ sampadyate caran // AB* 7.15 (33.3.3–4).

[59] Keith ([1920] 1981:65) considers these and other verses in this section of the *Brāhmaṇa* to be "general maxims" that were fitted into the story. This would imply that they were, in a sense, floating verses, the import of which would be widely known.

[60] I am aware of Collins' (1990:89) recent objections to uncritically equating the Pali canon with early Buddhism; however, for our purposes, this assumption remains valid.

[61] The historical primacy of the *Sutta Nipāta* seems to find confirmation

in a group of previously unknown Buddhist manuscripts recently acquired by the British Library. These birch-bark scrolls are written in the Gāndhārī language in Kharoṣṭhī script, and have tentatively been ascribed to the first century C.E. See Salomon 1997:356–357.

[62] Literally, "by his mouth."

[63] 658. *yo nindiyaṃ pasaṃsati, taṃ vā nindati yo pasaṃsiyo, vicināti mukhena so kaliṃ, kalinā tena sukhaṃ na vindati.* 659. *appamatto ayaṃ kali, yo akkhesu dhanaparājayo sabbassāpi sahāpi attanā, ayam eva mahattaro kali, yo sugatesu manaṃ padosaye.* Sutta Nipāta 3.10.658–659 (Mahāvagga), PTS ed. p. 127. I have rendered the phrase *vicināti... kaliṃ* by "gathers *kali;*" however, in this context, the meaning is probably "throws/casts *kali* (the losing throw)," as a metaphor for receiving something negative. Lüders ([1907] 1940:149) has argued convincingly that the verbal root *vi-ci* (both in Sanskrit *vicinoti* and Pali *vicināti*), when used with reference to dice or in a dice-related context, can mean "to throw or cast dice." The term for "fault" is *padosa* (Skt. *pradoṣa*). These verses are repeated in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.1.3.3 (Catukka Nipāta), PTS ed. vol. 2, p. 3; and in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 6.1.9 (PTS ed. vol. 1, p. 149). For a discussion of the pun on the word *kali* in the second of these verses, see Norman 1992:268. The comparison of the second verse also appears, with some modification, in the *Majjhima Nikāya* 3.170; translated by Horner [1959] 1990:215.

[64] *Sutta Nipāta* 3.10.664 (Mahāvagga), PTS ed. p. 128. For Norman's translation see 1992:76.

[65] *Mbh* 1.61.81; see above, notes 31 and 32. The Pali term *purisanta* is synonymous with Pali *purisādhama*, which corresponds to Sanskrit *puruṣādhama*, the term used in the Epic.

[66] *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.3.24 (PTS ed. vol. 2, p. 25).

[67] *natthi rāgasamo aggi natthi dosasamo kali*, Dhammapada 202. Pali *dosa* (hatred, ill-will, wickedness) corresponds to Sanskrit *dveṣa*. See also above, note 63.

[68] "*kali* means destruction," *kali vuccati vināso* (= Skt. *kalir vināśa ucyate*). *Jātaka* vol. 1, p. 488 (PTS ed.).

[69] *Dhammapada* 252, a verse that also appears in the birch-bark manuscript of the Gāndhārī *Dharmapada* (verse 272, in Brough 1962:161) which, like the Gāndhārī manuscripts mentioned above (n. 61), should probably be ascribed to the first century C.E. (Salomon 1997:357). *Dīgha Nikāya* 23.27 (PTS ed. vol. 2, pp. 348–349), in a story that also

appears in *Jātaka* vol. 1, p. 380 (PTS ed.), although in the Jātaka version the word *kali* is not used.

[70] *kali eva nūna gaṇhāmi asippo dhuttaho yathā / kaṭaṃ alāto gaṇhāti kitavā sikkhito yathā // Jātaka* vol. 6, p. 228, PTS ed. (verse 1005). Similarly, in vol. 6, p. 206 (verse 883), it is said that fools consider the recitation of the Vedas to be *kṛta* (good, propitious), while the wise see it as *kali* (negative, futile).

[71] *Majjhima Nikāya* 1.403, 406; Horner ([1957] 1989:72,75), translates *ubhayattha kaliggaha* here as "there is defeat in two ways," i.e. in both worlds.

[72] The Pali word *kaṭa* corresponds to Sanskrit *kṛta*. On the *kali-kṛta* opposition see also Lüders [1907] 1940:168–169.

[73] As in *Theragāthā* 462. Morris (1887:159) quotes other occurrences at *Jātaka* 4, 322 (for *kaṭaggaha*), and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.29 (for *kaliggaha*).

[74] The Pali expression *kaliṃ gaṇhāti*, "he holds *kali*," would be *kaliṃ gṛhṇāti* in Sanskrit; and the Pali compounds *kaliggaha* and *kaṭaggaha* would translate into Sanskrit as *kaligraha* and *kṛtagraha*.

[75] Book 7.

[76] 2.64.15; he is again said to be like death (*antaka*) at yugānta in 7.33.4.

[77] *yugānte kālavat*, 6.59.12

[78] *kālasyeva yugakṣaye*, 6.59.17.

[79] 6.53.2; see also 6.98.14 and 6.100.4.

[80] 7.134.55.

[81] *yugānte sarvabhūtānāṃ kālasṛṣṭa ivāntakaḥ*, 7.170.1.

[82] 8.55.28.

[83] 1.125.5.

[84] 6.1.24; 6.16.45.

[85] *yathā śabdaḥ samudrāṇāṃ yugakṣaye*, 6.114.17.

[86] *yugāntameghaughanibham tadānīm*, 6.76.19.

[87] *yugānte jalado yathā*, 6.88.25.

[88] *yugānte sarvabhūtāni trāsayantī yathāśaniḥ*, 8.10.22.

[89] *vajrarugṇā iva babhuḥ parvatā yugasaṃkṣaye*, 9.8.27.

[90] 6.73.40; 9.16.41; 10.6.13.

[91] 4.57.17; 7.68.48. These two verses, which are really two versions of the same verse (compare 4.57.17a, b to 7.68.47e, f), do not include a word for 'like,' to indicate comparison (although some variant readings do), but their similarity with the verse about Droṇa, as well as with the way in which the comparison to yugānta is made throughout the Epic, makes it clear that a comparison is intended.

[92] 7.13.8.

[93] 3.297.1.

[94] 7.51.42; instead of yugānta, the word here is *yugātyaya*, with the same meaning.

[95] *sa śabdaḥ sumahān rājan diśaḥ sarvā vyanādayat / trāsayām āsa tatsainyaṃ yugānta iva saṃbhṛtaḥ //* 7.79.20.

[96] *pīḍito...yathā yugakṣaye ghore candramāḥ pañcabhir grahaiḥ //* 6.96.36.

[97] *dyaur ivoditacandrārkā grahākīrṇā yugakṣaye //* 7.131.118. The verse is repeated, with slight changes, as 7.136.8.

[98] 3.23.32.

[99] *yathā prajvalitaḥ sūryo yugānte*, 7.6.18.

[100] *yugāntādityasaṃnibhāḥ*, 7.80.28.

[101] 7.65.13; 8.12.43.

[102] 7.66.20 and 8.57.55.

[103] *yugāntārkav iva*, 8.12.51.

[104] 7.90.40.

[105] 7.131.99.

[106] 11.23.15.

[107] *[tato] 'ntaka iva kruddhaḥ savajra iva vāsavaḥ / daṇḍapāṇir ivāsahyo mṛtyuḥ kālena coditaḥ // śūlapāṇir ivākṣobhyo varuṇaḥ pāśavān iva / yugāntāgnir ivārciṣmān pradhakṣyan vai punaḥ prajāḥ //* 7.64.14–15. Incidentally, these two verses also show that the end of the yuga is only one among many things that Epic heroes and happenings are compared to.

[108] *pradadāha kurūn sarvān arjunaḥ śastratejasā / yugānte sarvabhūtāni dhūmaketur ivotthitaḥ //* 7.31.45.

[109] *yugāntāgnisamo*, 6.114.6.

[110] *yugāntāgnir ivārciṣmān himāvan iva ca sthiraḥ* / 11.21.8. See also 8.18.118.

[111] 6.65.30.

[112] 7.67.25.

[113] *tataḥ krodhāt prajajvāla dharmaputro yudhiṣthiraḥ / yathā yugānte bhūtāni dhakṣyann iva hutāśanaḥ* // 6.80.8. Yudhiṣṭhira also looked fierce and terrible "like the Sun at *yugānta*," *yugāntādityasaṃnibham*, 6.80.12.

[114] *yugānte sarvabhūtāni bhasma kṛtveva pāvakaḥ* // 10.8.137.

[115] 7.131.97; see also 7.135.53.

[116] 7.150.82. Compare 7.131.95–98 to 7.150.80–83.

[117] *yugānte sarvabhūtāni saṃvartaka ivānalaḥ* // 7.172.27.

[118] "So on the summit of [mount] Mālyavat burns a fire called *saṃvartaka*, [it is] the fire of time, O bull of the Bhāratas!" *tathā mālyavataḥ śṛṅge dīpyate tatra havyavāṭ / nāmnā saṃvartako nāma kālāgnir bharatarṣabha* // 6.8.26. Throughout the Epic there are some comparisons to the *saṃvartaka* fire and to the fire of time (*kālāgni*), in the manner of the comparisons to yugānta. So, for instance, a mighty elephant in the battle is "like the *saṃvartaka* fire," *saṃvartaka ivānalaḥ*, 6.91.52; and the god Skanda is said to be like the fire of time, 3.187.17.

[119] *kālavat pracariṣyati...yugāntāgnisamaḥ*, 5.164.10–11.

[120] 2.39.12.

[121] *yugānte pāvako yathā...yugānte kālavad*, 6.59.12. See above, note 77.

[122] 3.84.10.

[123] Here are a few more examples. Agni, the fire god, burns down the Khāṇḍava forest as if showing yugānta (1.216.32), and then, during a battle, signs were seen like those at yugānta (1.218.38). Another forest fire is like the fire at yugānta (12.145.9); so is a fire in the Himalayas (13.127.34). Bhīṣma once used a Brahmā missile that shone as if showing yugānta (5.185.16); so did a spear he used in the war (7.90.21). A powerful weapon of Śalya's was also radiant like the fire at yugānta (6.81.26), as was a celestial weapon used by Arjuna (10.14.7). And the great exertion of the Kaurava troops was like yugānta (7.100.5).

[124] *vartamāne tathā raudre saṃgrāme lomaharṣaṇe / prakṣaye jagatas tīvre yugānta iva bhārata* // 7.102.8.

125 *yugāntam iva kurvāṇaṃ bhīṣmaṃ yudhiṣṭhire bale* // 6.102.52.

126 *yugasyeva viparyāso lokānām iva mohanam / bhīṣmasya ca vadhas tāta dronasya ca mahātmanaḥ* // 7.10.43. This verse does not use the word yugānta, but the allusion to a change of yuga is equivalent in meaning.

127 *pragṛhya bāhūn krośantyaḥ putrān bhrātṛn pitṝn api / darśayantīva tā ha sma yugānte lokasaṃkṣayam* // 11.9.13.

128 *yugāntakāle samprāpte bhūtānāṃ dahyatām iva / abhāvaḥ syād ayaṃ prāpta iti bhūtāni menire* // 11.9.20. The tragedy is referred to as "the complete destruction of the Kurus," *kurusaṃkṣaya*, 11.9.19.

129 *diṣṭyā nedaṃ mahārāja dāruṇam bharatakṣayam / kurusaṃkrandanaṃ ghoram yugāntam anupaśyasi* // 11.24.4.

130 *pāṇḍavāḥ pañca duḥkhārtā bhūtānīva yugakṣye* // 15.46.19.

131 *yugāntaṃ darśayiṣyati*, 5.50.32.

132 *udvartayan dasyusaṃghān sametān pravartayan yugam anyad yugānte / yadā dhakṣyāmy agnivat kauraveyāṃs tadā taptā dhṛtarāṣṭraḥ saputraḥ* // 5.47.59.

133 He glosses "another yuga" as "a time when dharma will prevail" (*yugam anyad dharmapradhānaṃ kālam*) and "the end of the yuga" as "when the destruction of the enemies takes place" (*yugānte śatrūṇāṃ saṃhāre jāte sati*).

134 The lowest of men, *puruṣādhamāḥ* (5.72.17), the same word used to describe Duryodhana in 1.61.80, quoted earlier, where he is also called a *pāpapuruṣa*, an evil man; see next note. In the verse to be quoted next he is called a *kalipuruṣa*.

135 *apy ayaṃ naḥ kurūṇāṃ syād yugānte kālasambhṛtaḥ / duryodhanaḥ kulāṅgāro jaghanyaḥ pāpapuruṣaḥ* // 5.72.18.

136 *yuganidhanasadṛśaparamaghoravegena vāyunā*, "Junāgaṛh Rock Inscription of Rudradāman I," lines 6–7; in Sircar 1965:176–177.

137 *Jātaka* vol. 1, p. 26 (PTS ed.).

138 Two examples from the *Rāmāyaṇa*: the weapons of the *rākṣasas* looked like the fire at yugānta (7.6.55), and Śatrughna's arrow shone like the fire of time at yugānta (7.61.20).

139 I have not included in this discussion the Mārkaṇḍeya episode (3.186–189), as it will receive careful attention further on.

140 A terrible wind, *mārutam ghoram*, is mentioned in 3.186.76, in the

Mārkaṇḍeya section, not in a comparison to, but in a description of the end of the world.

[141] 3.81.109; 9.37.44. The *saṃvartaka* fire is associated with Śiva in 13.14.112 and 13.14.184; but with Viṣṇu in 13.135.38, during the recitation of his one thousand names.

[142] 1.28.20.

[143] 5.195.13.

[144] Although Thomas (1994:266–267) makes the interesting suggestion that in the earlier phases of the myth, still within the *Mbh*, the destruction of the world was presided over by Yama, and this role was only later transferred to Śiva.

[145] The natural catastrophes that are used to describe the end of the world are directly related to the natural environment of South Asia. The elaborate descriptions of clouds, rain, thunder and lightning; of flooding; of scorching heat; can all be linked to the weather pattern established by the yearly monsoon cycle, with its dry spells and torrential rains. The main image of the interim period between the destruction of the world and a new creation is that of a vast expanse of water, a "single ocean," *ekārṇava*, on which the Purāṇic Viṣṇu sleeps during the night of Brahmā. So a Gupta inscription of the year 423/424 C.E. refers to Viṣṇu (Madhusūdana) as waking up in the month of Kārttika (Oct.–Nov.), that is, after the rainy season ("Gaṅgdhār Stone Inscription of Viśvavarman," lines 20–21, Fleet [1888] 1963:75, 77). The *ekārṇava* is mentioned both in Rudradāman's inscription (line 5, Sircar, 1965:176), and in the Mārkaṇḍeya episode of the *Mbh* (3.186.77, 79). As for earthquakes, the Indian subcontinent is an area of important seismic activity. These natural phenomena were then gradually blown up into cataclysmic events of eschatological and cosmogonic proportions.

[146] 1.19.16. The poet Kālidāsa (4th–5th centuries?) writes the following in his *Raghuvaṃśa* (13.6): "Puruṣa, after destroying the worlds, rests on that [ocean] absorbed in the yogic sleep he practices at yugānta, while the first creator—seated on a lotus that arose from [Puruṣa's] navel—praises him." *nābhiprarūḍhāmburuhāsanena saṃstūyamānaḥ prathamena dhātrā / amuṃ yugāntocitayoganidraḥ saṃhṛtya lokān puruṣo 'dhiśete //* It is significant that the medieval commentator Mallinātha (14th century) found it necessary to gloss Kālidāsa's use of yugānta as kalpānta, because, from a Purāṇic perspective, it is at the end of a kalpa—not of a

yuga—that the world is destroyed. See Nandargikar [1897] 1982:398.

[147] "From whom all beings are born at the beginning of the first yuga, and into whom they dissolve again at the end of the yuga," *yataḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni bhavanty ādiyugāgame / yasmiṃś ca pralayaṃ yānti punar eva yugakṣaye //* 13.135.11. See also 12.327.89, and 12.203.14-17.

[148] 6.62.40. Although *yuge yuge* here could simply mean "periodically." On the use of *yuge yuge* in the *Gītā* (and its earlier use in the *Ṛg Veda*), see below, Chapter 6, note 49.

[149] 1.1.28, 36-38.

[150] "Know the yuga of twelve thousand [years] to be a kalpa of four qualities; the revolution of a thousand kalpas is said to be a day of Brahmā;" *yugaṃ dvādaśasāhasraṃ kalpaṃ viddhi caturguṇam / daśakalpaśatāvṛttaṃ tad ahar brāhmam ucyate //* 12.291.14.

Chapter 3

The Dvāpara-Kali Transition: Placing the Action in the Yuga Scheme

If all the mentions of yugānta reviewed in the previous chapter have nothing to do with placing the events of the *Mahābhārata* at a certain moment in the cycle of the four yugas, where, then, is it said that these happenings took place at the end of the Dvāpara Yuga and the beginning of Kali? As stated earlier, the Epic says this clearly in very few places. Only nine, in fact, and most of them are single verses; in other words, they are brief, isolated instances. Moreover, these mentions generally bear no direct relationship to the story, and are, in all likelihood, part of the later strata of the text. Let us take a close look at each one of them.

The Textual Evidence

Book One: The Summary

The first mention appears at the very beginning of the *Mahābhārata*. In the second chapter of Book One, in the summary of the contents of the entire Epic, there is an explanation of the term Samantapañcaka, the name of the place where the confrontation between the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas is said to have taken place.

The bard Ugraśravas explains that, in that very place, Rāma Jāmadagnya had destroyed the *kṣatriyas*, and five lakes had been created with their blood. The area near the lakes was then called Samantapañcaka, which means "next to the five," or "all five." This happened, he says, during the *saṃdhi*, the transition period,

between the Tretā and the Dvāpara yugas.[1]
The bard then continues:

> And when the interim period between Kali and Dvāpara arrived, the fight between the armies of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas took place at Samantapañcaka.

> In that land of pure soil, firm in the supreme dharma, eighteen armies (*akṣauhiṇī*) came together, ready for battle.[2]

All of this is said somewhat in passing, while explaining the name of the place, and there is no further elaboration. By contrast, the text goes on to describe in detail what an army (*akṣauhiṇī*) is made up of. Now, the fact that this is found in the summary of the contents of the Epic indicates that it is a late passage. As van Buitenen has rightly pointed out, the lists of contents and the summaries were obviously composed after the text as a whole had been constituted, at least in the form found in the Critical Edition.[3] As will soon be clear, the assertion that the battle took place between the Dvāpara and Kali yugas is not borne out by the main body of the text itself. This verse was probably a late addition meant to 'officially' incorporate the events of the Epic into the yuga system, at a time, perhaps, when these events were already widely believed to have been determined by the yugas.

However brief, this mention is nevertheless important, because it predisposes the listener from the very outset to interpret everything that follows—the entire *Mahābhārata*—from the perspective of a change of yuga: the end of the Dvāpara and the beginning of the terrible Kali Yuga.

Book Twelve: The Supreme Nārāyaṇa

The next two instances we will look at are found in Book Twelve, in the Nārāyaṇīya section of the Mokṣadharma Parvan. In the first of the two, Nārāyaṇa explains that he is the Supreme God, the creator of everything. Speaking at some moment in the mythical past, presumably in the Kṛta Yuga,[4] he tells of how he will in the future incarnate as the different *avatāras*. He explains to the sage Nārada that he will be born as Rāma (Jāmadagnya) in

the Tretā Yuga, in order to destroy the *kṣatriyas.* Then, in the Tretā–Dvāpara *saṃdhi,* he will be Rāma, the son of Daśaratha, whose story is told in the *Rāmāyaṇa.*[5]
He then says:

> In the *saṃdhi* between Dvāpara and Kali, towards the end, I will appear in [the city of] Mathurā, because of Kaṃsa.[6]

This clearly refers to the birth of Kṛṣṇa for the purpose of killing King Kaṃsa, who had usurped the throne of Mathurā from his own father, Ugrasena. This motif plays a prominent role in Vaiṣṇava stories of Kṛṣṇa's childhood.

The entire section where this verse is found is mainly concerned with establishing Nārāyaṇa as the Supreme God, who descends to earth in the form of the different *avatāras.*

It is important to point out the obvious contradiction between this passage and the one in Book One, concerning the moment at which Paraśurāma (Rāma Jāmadagnya) and Rāma incarnate.[7] According to this account, Paraśurāma appears in the Tretā Yuga, and Rāma in the Tretā–Dvāpara transition period. But the passage in Book One places Paraśurāma, and not Rāma (whom it does not mention), in the *saṃdhi* between Tretā and Dvāpara. This contradiction illustrates how, even within the Epic, there is no clear agreement concerning the correlation between historical or mythological events and the yugas. And this lack of agreement can be attributed to the fact that the Epic throws together different opinions from various sources and different time periods. We shall discuss other relevant contradictions further on.

The other mention found in the Nārāyaṇīya comes soon after this one. Nārāyaṇa once created a *ṛṣi* called Apāntaratamas, who, according to the god, would later be born (as Vyāsa) in the Kali Yuga:

> And when Tiṣya (Kali) arrives again, Bhārata kings known as Kauravas will be born. They will be noble, famous on earth.

> They will be your descendants, and a rift will occur in the family leading to mutual destruction, except for you, O best of the twice-born!

> At that time you will be endowed with austerity, and you will divide the Vedas in different ways. When the black yuga arrives, you will be of black complexion.[8]

Here, again, the intention of the discourse seems to be to make it clear that Nārāyaṇa is the all-powerful supreme being. Vyāsa, who is not only the author of the Epic, but, also, in a sense, the originator of the events of the *Mahābhārata* (inasmuch as he is the progenitor of the two patriarchs from whom the feuding branches of the family, the Pāṇḍavas and the Dhārtarāṣṭras, descend) is said to be born "by the grace of Nārāyaṇa," and "from a part of him."[9] All of this looks more like a way of appropriating the *Mahābhārata* story—via the yugas—for the purpose of proclaiming the supreme status of Nārāyaṇa, the creator of everything.

In any event, the Nārāyaṇīya, as a whole, is probably a later addition to the Epic. This had already been acknowledged by Belvalkar, the editor of the Śānti Parvan for the Critical Edition, on several grounds, including its grammatical peculiarities.[10]

Books Six and Thirteen: Nārāyaṇa/Kṛṣṇa and the Section on Cosmology

Our next quote comes from Book Six, but it is very closely connected to the Nārāyaṇīya references. In fact, because of its style and content, it could have been taken directly out of the Nārāyaṇīya.[11]

Duryodhana asks the wise Bhīṣma what makes the Pāṇḍavas so difficult to conquer in battle, and Bhīṣma replies that it is the presence of Kṛṣṇa, who is none other than Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme God. Kṛṣṇa is invincible, as is Arjuna, who is Nara incarnate; Kṛṣṇa is Vāsudeva, the eternal god.[12]
He is:

> The one who, at the end of the Dvāpara Yuga and the beginning of the Kali Yuga, was praised by Saṃkarṣaṇa (Balarāma) in accordance with *sātvata* precepts.[13]

One wonders why Bhīṣma should have to give such an explana-

tion to Duryodhana, an explanation that seems to be alluding to something in the past, rather than the present. But, then again, the purpose of this section is to glorify Kṛṣṇa and to extol his divinity, to equate him with the supreme Nārāyaṇa. Such declarations of Kṛṣṇa's divine status are often made to be uttered by Bhīṣma.

Our next quote is of a similar nature, but it comes from Book Thirteen. Bhīṣma, on his death bed, tells Yudhiṣṭhira that Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme God. He is the creator of everything, he is the origin of the Vedic gods, he is Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa. He is born on earth when dharma wanes and, himself firm in dharma, goes to higher and lower worlds.[14] This idea, which echoes the famous verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā*,[15] is contradicted, however, by our verse, which states that:

> In the Kṛta Yuga, Kṛṣṇa was complete dharma. In the Tretā time (*kāla*), he resorted to knowledge (*jñāna*); but in the Dvāpara he was strength, Pārtha! In Kali, he came to earth as adharma.[16]

We will address the implications of the unusual statement that Kṛṣṇa is adharma when we review the last one of our quotes, but it must be noted here that this verse places Kṛṣṇa in the Kali Yuga.

Our next mention brings us back to Book Six, this time in a section that deals with cosmography. At the request of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Saṃjaya discourses on the different divisions of the world, with their rivers, mountains and inhabitants. At one point, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Saṃjaya to talk about the length of life; about good and bad rewards; and about the past, the present and the future, in the lands of Bhārata, Haimavat, and Harivarṣa. The last verse of Saṃjaya's reply reads as follows:

> This is the trailing end, King, of this Dvāpara, O ruler of men! Haimavat is superior (to Bhārata Varṣa) in [terms of] qualities; Harivarṣa is [even] better than that (Haimavat).[17]

This verse unmistakably places the conversation at the end of the Dvāpara Yuga; however, this chapter also includes what appears as an insoluble contradiction. Only a few verses earlier, in the course of his answer to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's question, Saṃjaya had ex-

plained that there are four yugas in the land of the Bhāratas, and
the duration of life varies depending on the yuga:

> Four thousand years, best of the Kurus, is the calculated length
> of life in the Kṛta Yuga, O best of kings!

> Then, three thousand in Tretā, King, and two thousand in
> Dvāpara, with one hundred being the case now.

> There is no established length for life in this Puṣya (Kali), best
> of the Bhāratas, here people [even] die in the womb or at
> birth.[18]

According to this, the conversation is taking place in the Kali
Yuga, and not at the end of the Dvāpara. There is no obvious
textual solution to this contradiction,[19] and, again, it shows how
fluid and unreliable these assertions are. What I would suggest to
be the most logical explanation, is that the statement indicating
that the action takes place in the Dvāpara is somewhat earlier,
and was meant to accord with the few other such statements in
the poem, or with what was then the current opinion, which re-
garded the Bhārata war and its aftermath to have taken place as
Dvāpara was coming to an end. On the other hand, the two
verses placing the action in Kali would have to be later (at least
in their extant versions), and were incorporated without regard for
the setting of the Epic's events, but were, instead, directed at a
later audience that was already accustomed to constant Purāṇic
and Śāstric references to 'this' evil Kali Yuga. In other words,
they were added, or altered, well after the main body of the
Mahābhārata was constituted.[20]

I must point out the unlikelihood of a scenario in which a king
like Dhṛtarāṣṭra would have to learn about the geography, the
history, and the inhabitants of the different countries—including
his own kingdom—at this late stage in his life, and under these
circumstances, as something merely incidental just before the war.
Although this follows the typical Purāṇic and epic style of laying
out didactic passages by putting them in the mouths of the vari-
ous personages, sometimes with no regard for the plausibility of
the circumstances, it could also suggest an external or later origin

for this section.

In fact, the entire section on cosmography (chapters six to thirteen of Book Six), of which there are parallel passages in several Purāṇas, has been the subject of debate concerning whether it was influenced by the Purāṇas or it constitutes an earlier, confused, version of the account.[21] We are dealing, then, with a portion of the Epic that has no clear connection to the main story line, it has serious contradictions, and its relationship to the poem is uncertain.

Book Three: Kali or Kṛta?

The next two instances of statements placing the action of the Epic between the Dvāpara and the Kali yugas come from the third book. The first of the two is part of a conversation between the Pāṇḍava hero Bhīma and Hanumān, the monkey god. Bhīma makes a request to see the form Hanumān had assumed when he jumped across the ocean, a feat he accomplished while aiding Rāma, according to the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. The god laughingly explains that he can no longer display that form, for that took place at another time, and times have now changed. Everything must conform to the yuga, and Hanumān is no exception.

At Bhīma's request, Hanumān then describes the four yugas and the traits of those born in each yuga. After a brief description of the negative characteristics of the Kali Yuga, he concludes by saying: "Such is the yuga called Kali, which will soon begin."[22] I will make no further comment on this passage at the moment, except for pointing out that it, too, refers to Nārāyaṇa as the Supreme God.[23]

The second instance from Book Three deserves special attention. It is, arguably, the most important section on the yugas in the whole poem, although more than being a section on the four yugas, it is largely devoted to a description of the Kali Yuga, or, more precisely, to a description of the terrible conditions of society at the end of the Kali Yuga. It is a long section comprising four chapters,[24] but only some portions of it deal directly with our subject. There are many problems with this passage, and I will

address the more relevant ones below.

During the twelve-year exile of the Pāṇḍavas, after their defeat at the dicing match, they encounter the sage Mārkaṇḍeya, who imparts to them teachings on various subjects. At one point, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Mārkaṇḍeya about the origin of things, and the sage embarks on a long discourse. He tells of the duration of each individual yuga, and explains that all four are collectively called a yuga. One thousand such yugas are a day of Brahmā, after which the world is destroyed.[25] He then embarks on a description of the social conditions at yugānta, which in this entire section has a different connotation from the one it carries in the rest of the Epic, and was, therefore, left out of the discussion on yugānta in the previous chapter. All images of world destruction are absent from these descriptions. Yugānta here refers to the decay of brahmanical society as the end of the Kali Yuga approaches and the subsequent prosperous Kṛta Yuga arrives. At yugānta, foreign and tribal kings control the land and levy onerous taxes, there is moral decay, people steal and disregard dharma, and they die young. It rains out of season.[26]

In a somewhat abrupt manner, the description then turns to what takes place at the end of one thousands yugas, *yugasahasrānta*, and now all our familiar themes related to the use of yugānta elsewhere in the Epic appear. Seven strong suns cause intense heat and the fire of destruction burns the world; huge clouds roll in, fanned by strong winds; there is lightning, and then rain for twelve years. The world is all flooded and, finally, strong winds disperse the clouds. The winds are swallowed by the Supreme God, who then goes to sleep on a lotus. All that remains is the large, single ocean, *ekārṇava*.[27]

What follows immediately is not directly relevant to our discussion, except for the fact that, floating on those desolate waters, Mārkaṇḍeya sees a child who turns out to be Kṛṣṇa, in whose body the entire universe is contained.[28] Kṛṣṇa explains that he is Nārāyaṇa, the creator and destroyer of everything. He incarnates when dharma decreases, and takes on a different color in each yuga. As Brahmā, he sleeps for a thousand yugas; when Brahmā

awakes, he creates the world.[29]
Next, Yudhiṣṭhira asks a follow-up question, and his words con-
stitute our quote:

> Then, Yudhiṣṭhira Kaunteya again questioned the great sage Mā-
> rkaṇḍeya, [this time] concerning the future state of affairs in the
> kingdom.

> We have heard from you, eloquent speaker, Bhārgava sage,
> about the extraordinary origin and destruction [that took place]
> at the beginning of the yuga.

> I am also curious about this Kali Yuga. What will remain when
> all dharmas are confused?

> How strong will men be then? What will they eat, what pastimes
> will they have, how long will they live, and how will they dress
> at the end of the yuga?

> After what extreme conditions will the Kṛta start again? Answer
> in detail, sage, for you speak here of so many things![30]

Yudhiṣṭhira's questions seem odd on several counts. First of all,
note that he refers to 'this' Kali Yuga, so, ultimately, this quote
does not even really place the action at the Dvāpara-Kali transi-
tion. Even if we want to explain this by assuming that it really
refers to the Kali Yuga that has just started, or is about to start,
this passage is at variance with the sequence of Epic events. The
great battle is still years away, and Kṛṣṇa's death yet another 36
years beyond the war.

What we see here is a shift in emphasis, from a preoccupation
with the beginning of the Kali Yuga—which is what one would
expect—to an interest in the end of Kali and the subsequent arri-
val of the Kṛta Yuga. Yudhiṣṭhira's query is not about the marks
that will signal the supposed imminent beginning of Kali but,
strangely enough, he is instead eager to hear of the signs that will
herald the return of Kṛta, as if he expected to live to witness it.
He is not interested in the early part of Kali, nor its middle, his
question—and Mārkaṇḍeya's answer—deal specifically with the
end of the yuga, the yugānta, the meaning of which has now been
narrowed down to mean the end of the Kali Yuga. And although

the end of the Kali Yuga is, by definition, also the end of the entire fourfold yuga, Mārkaṇḍeya's description of yugānta in this chapter has nothing to do with world destruction. It deals with a decadent society, one in which there will be mixed marriages, the roles of the social classes will be reversed, no one will perform the rituals, and people will be cruel and greedy.

At the end of the yuga, foreigners will rule, and bad kings will levy burdensome taxes on the people. In fact, this passage more or less repeats the description made just two chapters previously, close to the start of Mārkaṇḍeya's teaching, only it is longer.[31] There is a passing mention of seven suns, of thunder and fire, and of the Sun being eclipsed at the wrong time, but there is no cosmic catastrophe, the main idea being that the natural order of things is upset. Then, in the midst of all this chaos, the world gradually regenerates itself, starting with the *brāhmaṇas*, and a conjunction of the Sun, the Moon, and Jupiter announces the arrival of the Kṛta Yuga.[32]

Finally, as Kṛta dawns, things return to their proper course. A *brāhmaṇa* called Kalkin is born, and he becomes a universal ruler, a *cakravartin*. He destroys the foreigners, and re-establishes the rule of the twice-born by means of a Vedic horse sacrifice. Order is then restored and dharma adhered to, the brahmanical social order prevails, and rituals are again practiced. Each social class performs its appointed duty and the people prosper. [33]

So, what does all of this have to do with Yudhiṣṭhira and his Pāṇḍava brothers, as they live in exile and await the moment when they can claim their kingdom? Very little. In fact, Mārkaṇḍeya's entire teaching on the yugas has no connection to the Epic story, except, maybe, for his proclamation of Kṛṣṇa's divine status.

The incongruity of these circumstances was perceived by Biardeau, who then offered an odd explanation by suggesting that the dicing match could mark the transition from Dvāpara to Kali, the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the forest could be the Kali Yuga, and the great war would then mark the beginning of a new Kṛta Yuga.[34] This, of course, implies ignoring Purāṇic tradition—so important

to Biardeau—which clearly considers the war and/or Kṛṣṇa's death as the beginning of Kali. It also sidesteps Hanumān's assertion, made only a few chapters earlier, that Kali was about. to begin. And what about Kalkin? He is nowhere to be found, neither during nor after the war.

Biardeau seems willing to pass over these and other contradictions for the sake of an elusive unity in the text, a unity that requires considering all chronological references as irrelevant, and subservient to a larger mythological plot based on the need for the periodic appearance of Viṣṇu's *avatāras.*[35] The problem, in this particular case, is that she seems bound by a need to incorporate the yuga theory as essential to the Epic's plot, thus making it necessary to alter the theory itself in order to explain the contradictions.[36]

Mārkaṇḍeya himself gives us a clue for explaining the lack of consistency between this long section and the main plot. Towards the end of his discourse, he credits his source:

> I have told you everything about the past and the future as I remember it from the *purāṇa* recited by [the god] Vāyu, which is praised by the *ṛṣis.*[37]

Here we have a recognition of an outside source for the teachings: the stories of old (*purāṇa*) attributed to the god Vāyu, a corpus that was to become, or already was at the time of the composition of this passage, the *Vāyu Purāṇa.* And, sure enough, some sections of his discourse have parallel passages in the Purāṇa, the most striking one being the one that describes the destruction of the world at the end of one thousand fourfold yugas. In this case, the *Mahābhārata* passage appears to be a shorter rendering of the one in the *Vāyu,*[38] but it must also be borne in mind that the extant version of the *Vāyu Purāṇa* is undoubtedly different from the earlier one the Epic poet could be quoting from, and the Epic passage itself has surely undergone modifications.

The Purāṇa also has a section on the confusion of the social classes, the *varṇas,* at yugānta, as well as one on the appearance of Kalkin, which gives a detailed list of all the heretic peoples he

destroys before the Kṛta Yuga begins and things return to their proper course.[39] It is interesting that whereas the Epic lays the blame especially on foreigners, the *Vāyu Purāṇa* seems more intent on blaming heretical sects—many of which are mentioned by name—for the decline of dharma.

There are also several sections of Mārkaṇḍeya's discourse that are almost identical to passages in the *Brahma Purāṇa*,[40] although this Purāṇa, in its present form, is generally considered to be late.[41] Descriptions of Kalkin are also found in other Purāṇas.

There can hardly be any doubt that the Mārkaṇḍeya section is a late addition to the Epic. Making Yudhiṣṭhira ask a question about conditions at the end of Kali and the beginning of Kṛta—something far removed from his own situation—is merely a device for justifying the inclusion of this subject matter in the Epic. As I have stated earlier, referring to 'this' Kali Yuga implies that the listener—and the poet—is familiar with later Purāṇic and Śāstric literature.

There is, however, an additional element here. In the Purāṇas and the Śāstras there is an understanding that the Kali Yuga has started relatively recently, and that it will continue for a very long time, so resignation and acceptance are called for. Here, on the other hand, stress is laid on the end of Kali and the dreadful events that will, themselves, signal the arrival of Kṛta. This emphasis on the terrible conditions at the end of the Kali Yuga serves to build expectations for the liberating arrival of a new Kṛta Yuga. In other words, these descriptions of yugānta seem to reflect a belief that the Kali Yuga would soon end and Kṛta would start. This, of course, does not belong in the Epic, nor does it fit in the later classical theory of a Kali Yuga that would still continue for hundreds of thousands of years before running out. So the tradition reflected in these passages could date from a time when the Kali Yuga was still thought to last for one thousand years, before the duration of the yugas was amplified by considering it should be reckoned in divine years, thus resulting in the astronomical figures that later became standard.

At some point in the last centuries B.C.E. and the early centu-

ries C.E., there must have been real expectations that Kali would end in the foreseeable future, but later, as social conditions did not bear out these expectations, the figures were reinterpreted and the end of the yuga was pushed farther into the future.[42] This brings us to what could possibly be the source, or one of the sources, of these passages on yugānta, both in the *Vāyu Purāṇa* and in the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the *Mahābhārata*: a text somewhat misleadingly called the *Yuga Purāṇa*.

The *Yuga Purāṇa* is not really a Purāṇa in the classical usage of the term, it is a chapter of the *Gārgīya Jyotiṣa*, a work on astronomy and astrology that is alluded to more than once in the Epic.[43] It is only 115 verses long, and it is mainly concerned with describing events at yugānta, understood not in the sense of total world destruction, but merely as the end of the adharmic and unbrahmanical Kali Yuga. Its descriptions, however, are of a decidedly historical nature, as the text gives names of kings that will rule when the end of the yuga approaches.

As has been pointed out by Mitchiner, there are two features that set the *Yuga Purāṇa* account aside from the one in the *Mahābhārata* and those in the Purāṇas: it mentions the reigns of specific kings, as opposed to merely mentioning peoples, and it does not refer to Kalkin.[44] Another interesting fact is that it does not say how long the yugas last, but it contradicts the standard figures for the length of life in each yuga. It talks of life lasting for 100,000 years in the Kṛta, 10,000 in the Tretā, and 1,000 in the Dvāpara,[45] a decimal arrangement which is at odds with the 4-3-2-1 sequence based on the dice throws.[46]

The text begins with a question posed by Skanda to the god Śaṃkara (Śiva) about conditions at yugānta, a question which is very similar to Yudhiṣṭhira's. After a brief account of the decline of dharma from one yuga to the next, the description turns to the terrible conditions at yugānta, and to a succession of kings which includes mention of Yavana (Indo-Greek) and Śaka (Scythian) invasions. The text explains that, as things get worse and the end of the yuga approaches, several geographical regions, from the Vindhya range to the Kṛṣṇā river and along the Kāverī in Tamil

Nadu, will be safe havens where people will prevail at the end of the yuga. Although it does not explicitly say so, the text implies that at that time, and in those places, a new Kṛta Yuga will commence. The historical account ends with the expulsion of invading Śaka rulers, which Mitchiner estimates took place around the year 60 B.C.E.[47]

According to Mitchiner, the author of the *Yuga Purāṇa* was convinced that the Kali Yuga had ended after the defeat of the Śakas, and a new Kṛta Yuga was beginning, and this was a popular belief at the time and place of composition of the *Yuga Purāṇa*, which he places around the year 25 B.C.E., in the city of Ujjain. He also suggests that this would explain why the chronological era of 58 B.C.E., which after around the year 400 C.E. was known as the Mālava Era, and after 750 C.E. as the Vikrama Era because it commemorated the defeat of the Śakas at the hands of the legendary Mālava hero Vikrama, was originally known as the Kṛta Era.[48]

In contrast to this, when Mārkaṇḍeya refers to oppressive rulers at yugānta he mentions the Āndhras, Śakas, Pulindas, Yavanas, Kāmbojas, Aurṇikas, Śūdras, and Ābhīras.[49] Mitchiner contends that the inclusion of the Ābhīras on this list indicates that the passage cannot be earlier than around 250 C.E., thus making it much later than the *Yuga Purāṇa* account.[50] His conclusion coincides with those of Dwivedi, Yadava, and R. S. Sharma, who, on the basis of the social, political, religious and economic conditions described, attribute the Mārkaṇḍeya section on yugānta in the Epic to the third or fourth centuries C.E.[51] In other words, this confirms that the entire section on yugānta in Book Three, forms part of the late strata of the Epic, and it indicates that these *Mahābhārata* descriptions are probably a later adaptation or reformulation of ideas presented earlier in the *Yuga Purāṇa*, or in some other external source.

Book Nine: The Death of Duryodhana

Our next, and final instance of the Epic clearly placing the action at a certain point in the succession of yugas comes from Book

Nine. As in the case of our previous quote, this verse actually places the action in the Kali Yuga, and not at the end of the Dvāpara or during the Dvāpara–Kali transition period.

The quote appears towards the end of the great battle, when Bhīma and Duryodhana engage in combat. A furious Bhīma mortally strikes Duryodhana in the thighs, and throws him to the ground. He then proceeds to kick him in the head as he lies defenseless, an action that Yudhiṣṭhira quickly condemns. At this point Rāma (that is Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's brother) becomes enraged, for aiming below the navel is against the rules of proper combat. When he tries to intervene, Kṛṣṇa stops him and explains that Bhīma is merely fulfilling the vow he had made earlier, at the fateful dicing match. At that time, Duryodhana had humiliated Draupadī by having her dragged into the assembly hall, and then exposing his left thigh to her with obvious sexual intentions. Bhīma's response had been a promise to break Duryodhana's thigh in battle.[52] So now Kṛṣṇa asks his brother to control his anger, and declares:

> Know that the Kali Yuga has arrived, and the vow of the Pāṇḍava (Bhīma) has been completed. May the Pāṇḍava now be free of his obligation regarding his hostility and his vow.[53]

Kṛṣṇa's words could probably be interpreted as meaning that the Kali Yuga was starting there and then, and this verse could, conceivably, have contributed to the belief that Kali began during the war. The first part of the verse could also be rendered as "know that the Kali Yuga is at hand," but if so construed it still indicates that the onset of Kali is imminent.[54]

It is noteworthy that this is the only one of our mentions that occurs in the context of the story, and it comes at a culminating moment, when Duryodhana, the protagonist of all the envy and hatred that brought about the downfall of the family, lies on the ground mortally wounded. However, the casual way in which Kṛṣṇa utters these words, with no further elaboration, makes this half-verse highly suspect. If a change of yuga is the cause of all that has transpired, and, especially, if he is declaring that Kali is now beginning, the matter surely deserves more attention. The

brevity of his statement assumes full previous knowledge of the change of yuga and all its dire consequences on the part of his listeners. It seems to imply that it is common knowledge that Bhīma's vow would be fulfilled at the time of the change of yuga. This, as we have seen, is not true for the players. If we were to remove from the Epic all of the mentions that are late, the players would be left in the dark concerning the connection between their actions and the beginning of the Kali Yuga.[55]

By contrast, it is the audience that is fully aware of what living in the Kali Yuga entails, and clearly understands all the implications. It is with them that the thought of being in Kali will resonate strongly. But this must be a later audience, one already accustomed, as mentioned above, to hearing frequently from Purāṇic bards and Śāstric writers about being in the Kali Yuga, and to attributing every negative aspect of society and human character to that fact. Within the Epic, an awareness of all of this would imply, at the very least, knowledge of the passages in Books One, Three, and Six which, as we have discussed, are late and/or problematic. The reference to the Kali Yuga having started as an implied explanation for what is happening is, thus, not intended for the players; it is, most likely, an interpolation added for the benefit of a later audience, one that is fully aware of the meaning of the Kali Yuga.

It is not difficult to guess why a mention of the Kali Yuga would have been inserted at this particular point. For it is precisely here that an explanation was needed for the blatant breach of dharma this incident entails, especially since this is also the defining moment of the battle, when the Pāṇḍavas can finally claim victory. As pointed out by Matilal, Kṛṣṇa really offers two different reasons to justify Bhīma's conduct.[56] To Balarāma, he explains that Bhīma needed to fulfill his vow, but to Arjuna he also gives a more pragmatic explanation: Bhīma had to break the rules because they risked losing the war, as Duryodhana was now very dangerous because he was desperate, and, in addition, he had perfected his skills with the mace by practicing diligently for thirteen years.[57] To a Purāṇic audience, this troubling behavior on

Krsna's part could better be understood by attributing it to the
decadent nature of the times, to the Kali Yuga.[58]

This brings us back to one of our earlier quotes, which equates
Krsna with adharma in the Kali Yuga.[59] That unusual statement
must surely be an attempt at explaining why Krsna, considered as
an *avatāra* of Visnu/Nārāyana, is behind much of the trickery that
the Pāndavas resort to in order to win the war: it must be because
of the Kali Yuga. Krsna's (and the Pāndavas') non-dharmic be-
havior was now attributed to the negative influence of the Kali
Yuga. How else could the poets explain the fact that the Supreme
God himself, who descends to earth in order to restore dharma,
advocates the use of non-dharmic means? So, again, that verse is
probably a late addition, intended to explain Krsna's behavior to
an audience who both saw him as the incarnation of the Supreme
God, and was thoroughly familiar with the meaning and the im-
plications of the Kali Yuga.[60]

But, to return to Krsna's words to Balarāma, the probable late-
ness of this statement about the Kali Yuga can also be gleaned at
from the fact that it is put into Krsna's mouth. As we know, it is
said in many Purānas that it was Krsna's death that marked the
exact beginning of Kali. Here, however, he is alive and well, and
states that Kali has already begun or is about to begin, while the
moment of his death is still decades away. It is hard to imagine
that this statement could already have been part of the Epic when
the Purānic tradition concerning Krsna's passing and the start of
the Kali Yuga took shape.

Weighing the Evidence

We have now reviewed all the instances in which the *Mahā-
bhārata* places the action at the Dvāpara–Kali transition or even,
in some cases, already in the Kali Yuga. While evaluating the
import of all these quotes there are three things to be considered.
In the first place, it is evident that there are numerous inconsis-
tencies and contradictions. Consider the fact, for instance, that in
the two relevant sections of Book Three, Hanumān's and Mā-

rkaṇḍeya's discourses, which are not far from each other, the action is placed, respectively, in the Dvāpara and in the Kali yugas. These two sections also disagree on a basic item of symbolism. According to Hanumān, Nārāyaṇa's colors throughout the yugas are—from Kṛta to Kali—white, red, yellow and black; whereas in Mārkaṇḍeya's version Kṛṣṇa gives them as white, yellow, red, and black, with the colors for Tretā and Dvāpara inverted.[61]

We even have a third opinion concerning when the action took place, as the verse from Book One states that the battle was fought during the *saṃdhi*, the transition period between both yugas. This confusion as to precisely where in the yuga scheme the Epic's events belong, illustrates how far removed such concerns are from the main story line.

Whatever the exact circumstances of each one of our quotes, the fact remains that they are too few and too conflicting to be an organic part of the story. If placing the action historically according to the yuga system were crucial to the Epic, one would expect more consistency, especially when the references are so scarce. This lack of agreement suggests that the yuga theory is only loosely connected to the Epic, and that this connection was probably late and came from various sources.

The second element to be considered is the decidedly sectarian character of most of these passages. The yugas seem to be used as a Vaiṣṇava sectarian tool in order to explain the recurrence of the *avatāras* of Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. The main theme in most of them is the supreme character of Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa, and his appearance on earth at crucial moments when dharma is at a low point. This, incidentally, is also true of many passages that describe the yugas throughout the Epic, particularly in the Nārāyaṇīya, whether they place the action in a particular yuga or not. One might even talk of a Vaiṣṇava appropriation of the Epic by means of the yuga system. In this sense, Biardeau was right to consider that all contradictions within the text concerning the yugas were forgotten for the benefit of a mythological plot based on the need for the periodic appearance of the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu.[62] But, whereas she seems to consider the yugas and the

Vaiṣṇava mythological plot as essential to the story, I believe the evidence strongly suggests that both are later additions. It must be remembered that, for Biardeau, the Epic story is primarily a myth with an intention, rather than a narrative later mythologized.[63]

Finally, the third element to be considered when evaluating the references discussed in this chapter, is the generally agreed lateness of most of the passages involved. Although there is no absolute agreement as to precisely what the different layers of the Epic are, there is little discussion that Books Three and Twelve contain much foreign material. And it is in these two books that the majority of our quotes are found. Indeed, descriptions of the yugas in general are also heavily concentrated in these two books, as even a cursory look through Sörensen's *Mahābhārata* index will quickly reveal.[64] Even though some attempt was made by the poets to weave the yuga theory into the text, it always remained on the periphery of the narrative, never at its core, and, on close inspection, the 'cut and paste' nature of these sections becomes apparent.

It goes without saying that if the placement of the Epic story at the Dvāpara–Kali transition is not central to the poem, and if, indeed, neither is the yuga theory in general, any attempt at interpreting elements of the Epic assuming they are essential will be based on a false assumption. With this in mind, we must question Hiltebeitel's explanation of the fact that there are three important characters in the Epic bearing the name Kṛṣṇa, "the black one." They are Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's charioteer and Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa's *avatāra*; Kṛṣṇā, that is Draupadī, the polyandrous wife of the five Pāṇḍava brothers; and Vyāsa himself, whose name is Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana.

Hiltebeitel suggests that there is an intentional symbolical meaning behind these names, a meaning which he seeks, primordially, in a connection to the association between the black color and the Kali Yuga. This association, as we have seen, is expressed in terms of the different colors Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa assumes in each one of the yugas, with black being his color for the Kali

Yuga. There is only one instance in which Kṛṣṇa's name is played upon in order to associate it to the Kali Yuga, and another in which it is simply stated that his color is black in Kali. They are both in Book Three, and we have mentioned them above.[65] There is also only one such instance regarding Vyāsa, when it is prophesied that he will be of black complexion in the black yuga, as a manifestation of Apāntaratamas, the *ṛṣi* created by Nārāyaṇa. It was also quoted above,[66] and it appears in the Nārāyaṇīya, which Hiltebeitel himself acknowledges to be "presumably" late.[67] Nowhere is there a connection made between Kṛṣṇā-Draupadī's color and the Kali Yuga.

From this meager evidence, Hiltebeitel concludes that "at the very least, the blackness of the three figures seems to be a sign of the times, that is, of the arrival or onset of the Kali Yuga."[68] If the entire poem were built around the change between the Dvāpara Yuga and the Kali Yuga, and if it permeated the narrative, then, maybe, it might be safe to assume that something as essential as the names of three key players could conceivably already incorporate a message concerning the change of yuga. But the *Mahābhārata* is not built around this idea. We have seen that the evidence is against such an interpretation.[69] One is, of course, still free to interpret these names in such a manner, but, again, this implies viewing the Epic through a Purāṇic lens, it requires taking it as a given that the Bhārata war and the death of Kṛṣṇa are the great events that mark the momentous change from Dvāpara to Kali, and that the Epic story gravitates around this belief.

The *Mahābhārata*, as any other work of comparable social and religious importance, can be, and indeed is, interpreted and re-interpreted at different times, and from different perspectives. There is no doubt that, in time, the Epic became synonymous with a change of yuga, and this had already been incorporated into the later strata of the poem. But it is quite another matter to assume that the Epic was constructed with a complex hidden mythological and symbolical fabric for the purpose of enacting the change of yuga.

For Hiltebeitel, as for Biardeau, the Epic and the yugas seem to be inseparable.[70] In the close of a thought-provoking chapter on the death of the four Kaurava generals, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya, to each of whom an Epic book (a *parvan*) is devoted, Hiltebeitel states that: "In terms of time, all the epic's events occur at the end of a yuga (*yugānta*), a sort of 'liminal' period in which these four figures and their *parvans* .... seem to represent the sum of the yugas, as if all four yugas were potentially present at the point of transition."[71] Such a reading requires projecting onto the text something that is simply not there.

As for the three Kṛṣṇas, there is no difficulty in adopting the simpler, albeit probably less appealing, explanation that these three names originally could have alluded to the actual complexion of the players, or in any case, to some symbolic meaning particular to each one of them.[72] When the yugas were superimposed on the story, it became natural to identify Kṛṣṇa's blackness with the dark character of the Kali Yuga. In the case of Vyāsa, this was used to make a pun as part of the elaborate process of Vaiṣṇava appropriation of the story.

Kali as Puṣya

Before ending this chapter, there is something that deserves comment. It is the fact that in some of the passages we have quoted, the Kali Yuga is referred to by the names of Puṣya or Tiṣya instead of Kali. This is surprising for two reasons. In the first place, both *puṣya* and *tiṣya* are terms used to indicate something fortunate and auspicious—even the best of something—and this is exactly the opposite of the meaning of *kali*. In the second place, neither *puṣya* nor *tiṣya* are names derived from the dice throws, even though when they are used to name the fourth yuga, the other three yugas are called by their usual names.[73] What can we make of this?

We must first point out that there are only six instances of Puṣya or Tiṣya being used as names for the Kali Yuga. Four of them are in the brief chapter on the yugas in the section on cos-

mography in Book Six, which we have already discussed,[74] and the remaining two are in the Nārāyaṇīya.[75] The first of these last two is the passage in which Vyāsa's dark complexion is referred to in connection with the dark yuga, and the second is an interesting verse we have not yet discussed. It appears in the long section where Nārāyaṇa, in the Kṛta Yuga, talks prophetically of the yugas and of his different *avatāras*. After describing how dharma will lose one of its four legs in Tretā and another in Dvāpara, he has this to say of the last yuga:

> Then, when the Tiṣya Yuga arrives preceded by misfortune (*kali*), dharma will, everywhere, have only one leg.[76]

What makes this verse interesting is that after calling the fourth yuga Tiṣya, he finds it necessary to add that it will be preceded by *kali*, as if to leave no doubt concerning the negative character of the last yuga. This could indicate a tacit recognition of the contradiction inherent in the name. The poet probably did not feel comfortable changing the received name altogether, but decided, at least, to include the word *kali* as part of the description.[77]

Where then, did such an unlikely name for the Kali Yuga originate? The first thing that comes to mind is one of the lunar constellations, the *nakṣatra* Tiṣya. We know that in Book Three of the Epic, as well as in several Purāṇas, there is a verse stating that the new Kṛta Yuga will be heralded by an auspicious planetary conjunction of the Sun, the Moon, and Jupiter in Tiṣya. As the beginning of Kṛta is also the end of Kali, one could assume that this is how the Tiṣya Yuga received its name. This, however, does not seem reasonable, as it would only further enhance the positive and auspicious nature of the term, thus reinforcing the contradiction inherent in giving the Kali Yuga a name indicating excellence. It is noteworthy that the name is not used in the later literature. Besides, it is possible that this conjunction was originally meant more as a statement of the astrological conditions at the time of Kalkin's birth—although this is never stated explicitly—than as a marker for the Kṛta Yuga itself.[78]

Another possibility is that Puṣya/Tiṣya may have been used for the Kali Yuga because of a verse found in the *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāh-*

maṇa—one of the late Brāhmaṇas—or a tradition connected with that verse. The verse uses the names Puṣya, Dvāpara, Khārvā, and Kṛta in connection with the new and full Moon days and the two days preceding them. Although this verse has been considered to refer to the yugas, this is probably incorrect.[79] But regardless of whether the Brāhmaṇa verse refers to the yugas or not, it could still conceivably be the source of the Epic's use of the term, due to the correspondence between two of the names it uses and the names of the yugas.

We could speculate that because of the parallelism between the names in the *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* and those of the yugas, Puṣya was applied to the Kali Yuga with no regard for the contradiction such a name implied. This then perhaps required of the Nārāyaṇīya poet to point out that the Puṣya Yuga was a *kali* yuga, that it was, indeed, *the* Kali Yuga. It must be remembered that we are dealing with a historical period when the yuga theory was at an early stage of development, and many of its characteristics were not yet clearly defined or universally agreed upon.

There is not enough textual evidence for us to reach a conclusion concerning the origin of Puṣya as a name for the Kali Yuga, but the fact that the name is not derived from the dice game further suggests that this tradition came from outside the *Mahābhārata*, where the names of the yugas are closely connected with, even confused with the names of the dice throws. It is interesting, however, that one of the verses that use Puṣya for Kali in the description of the yugas in Book Six, is a verse that appears with slight variations in several Purāṇas. With one exception, that of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, the Purāṇic version of the verse reads Kali instead of Puṣya/Tiṣya,[80] and this could indicate that the Epic version of the verse, which is found in a chapter that uses Puṣya several times, is earlier than the one extant in most Purāṇas. The entire matter, however, is open to discussion.

Notes

1 *Mbh* 1.2.3–8.

2 *antare caiva samprāpte kalidvāparayor abhūt / samantapañcake yuddham kurupāṇḍavasenayoḥ // tasmin paramadharmiṣṭhe deśe bhūdoṣavarjìte / aṣṭādaśa samājagmur akṣauhiṇyo yuyutsayā //* 1.2.9–10.

3 Van Buitenen 1973:2.

4 According to 12.324.5 and 12.327.73.

5 12.326.77–78.

6 *dvāparasya kaleś caiva samdhau paryavasānike / prādurbhāvaḥ kamsahetor mathurāyām bhaviṣyati //* 12.326.82. Literally, the second half of the verse reads: "there will be a manifestation [of myself] in Mathurā, because of Kamsa."

7 Rāma Jāmadagnya is never called Paraśurāma in the Epic; this epithet is used in 'the Purāṇas and in later literature. I use it here to avoid confusion between the two Rāmas.

8 *punas tiṣye ca samprāpte kuravo nāma bhāratāḥ / bhaviṣyanti mahātmāno rājānaḥ prathitā bhuvi // teṣām tvattaḥ prasūtānām kulabhedo bhaviṣyati / parasparavināśārtham tvām ṛte dvijasattama // tatrāpy anekadhā vedān bhetsyase tapasānvitaḥ / kṛṣṇe yuge ca samprāpte kṛṣṇavarṇo bhaviṣyasi //* 12.337.42–44.

9 *nārāyaṇaprasādena...nārāyaṇāmśajam,* 12.337.55.

10 CE, vol. 16, p. ccii (1966). Jaiswal (1981:15–16) dates the Nārāyaṇīya in the third century or the first half of the fourth century C.E., and considers it to be later than the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The Nārāyaṇīya is 12.321–339.

11 Belvalkar (see previous note), had already pointed to the similarities between 6.61–64 (where our passage appears) and the Nārāyaṇīya.

12 6.62.12, 37.

13 *dvāparasya yugasyānte ādau kaliyugasya ca / sātvatam vidhim āsthāya gītaḥ samkarṣaṇena yaḥ //* 6.62.39. Note that the term yugānta is used here, but it is clearly said to be the Dvāpara yugānta, with 'yuga' in the genitive case. It is not really yugānta, but *yugasyānta,* thus distinguishing it from its formulaic use in the locative case (*yugānte*) elsewhere in the Epic when referring to the end of the world. "...in accordance with *sātvata* precepts (*vidhi*)," *sātvatam vidhim āsthāya;* the same expression is used in 12.322.19, 23, in the Nārāyaṇīya, while

talking about a king called Uparicara, who was devoted to Nārāyaṇa. This *sātvata vidhi* is said to have been expounded by Sūrya, the Sun. Some chapters later—still in the Nārāyaṇīya—Nārāyaṇa is said to have given the *sātvata* dharma (i.e. the *sātvata vidhi*) to the god Brahmā for creating the Kṛta Yuga (12.336.27). Brahmā did, and the *sātvata* dharma reached all the worlds and remained there (12.336.31). The term *sātvata* is sometimes used for Kṛṣṇa (e.g. in 3.187.53, 14.51.47), and seems to be a synonym for Yādava. The word came to be used for referring to a devoted follower of Kṛṣṇa, a *bhakta*. In a sense, the *sātvata dharma/vidhi* can be considered to be synonymous with the Bhāgavata religion. In the Nārāyaṇīya, the term is connected to Pāñcarātra doctrine.

[14] The entire passage is 13.143; the descent of dharma is mentioned in verse 11.

[15] *BhG* 4.7-8; *Mbh* 6.26.7-8.

[16] *kṛte yuge dharma āsīt samagras tretākāle jñānam anuprapannaḥ / balaṃ tv āsīd dvāpare pārtha kṛṣṇaḥ kalāv adharmaḥ kṣitim ājagāma //* 13.143.9.

[17] 6.11.14. For a translation of the entire chapter, along with the Sanskrit text and textual notes, see Appendix A.

[18] 6.11.5-7.

[19] See the notes to the translation in Appendix A.

[20] In Book 13, several manuscripts include another reference to 'this' Kali Yuga; however, it is found in one of a series of chapters that were not included in the CE, but were relegated to an appendix. The verse reads: "And listen to another secret dharma that bears great results; with the arrival of this Kali Yuga (or: in this Kali Yuga) it brings happiness to men," *śrūyatāṃ cāparo dharmaḥ sarahasyo mahāphalaḥ / imaṃ kaliyugaṃ prāpya manuṣyāṇāṃ sukhāvaḥ /* Book 13, Appendix 1, No. 14, lines 354-355 (13.129.9 in Roy's and Dutt's translations). This is only a few verses away from the allusion to *kali* in broken vessels, which I referred to in Chapter 2, note 12.

[21] See Belvalkar, CE, vol. 6, pp. cxxiv-cxxv (1947).

[22] *etat kaliyugaṃ nāma acirād yat pravartate /* 3.148.37. For a translation of the entire passage (3.148.5-37), with notes and the Sanskrit text, see Appendix B.

[23] 3.148.16.

[24] 3.186-189.

[25] 3.186.17-23.

[26] 3.186.24-55.

[27] 3.186.56-77. This whole section of the Epic (3.186-189) seems to confuse—or to attempt to reconcile—the two kinds of yugānta: the end of the world that we discussed in the previous chapter, and here referred to as the *yugasahasrānta* (3.186.56); and the end of the Kali Yuga, when there is widespread social and moral decay.

[28] 3.186.78-129.

[29] 3.187.1-47.

[30] *yudhiṣṭhiras tu kaunteyo mārkaṇḍeyaṃ mahāmunim / punaḥ papraccha sāmrājye bhaviṣyāṃ jagato gatim // āścaryabhūtaṃ bhavataḥ śrutaṃ no vadatāṃ vara / mune bhārgava yad vṛttaṃ yugādau prabhavāpyayau // asmin kaliyuge 'py asti punaḥ kautūhalaṃ mama / samākuleṣu dharmeṣu kiṃ nu śeṣaṃ bhaviṣyati // kiṃvīryā mānavās tatra kimāhāravihāriṇaḥ / kimāyuṣaḥ kiṃvasanā bhaviṣyanti yugakṣaye // kāṃ ca kāṣṭhāṃ samāsādya punaḥ saṃpatsyate kṛtam / vistareṇa mune brūhi vicitrāṇiha bhāṣase //* 3.188.3-7.

[31] This passage is 3.188.10-73, the previous one is 3.186.24-55. As mentioned, they both describe yugānta, and they coincide in applying the term to the end of Kali prior to the arrival of Kṛta, with no world destruction taking place. The fact that both passages repeat the same ideas suggests that they were probably two versions from different sources, which the Epic poet decided to include with no careful attempt at blending them. They even contradict each other, as 186.52 states that women at yugānta give birth as early as at 7 & 8 years of age, and men at 10 & 12, whereas the ages given by 188.48 are 5 & 6 for girls, and 7 or 8 for boys.

[32] The verse describing this conjunction (3.188.87) also appears in the *Vāyu* (2.37.407), as well as in other Purāṇas. It has its own problems, which I have discussed in González-Reimann 1988:131.

[33] 3.188.74-93, 189.1-12.

[34] Biardeau 1976:153-154; Biardeau & Péterfalvi 1985:234.

[35] "Is it necessary to look for coherence among the dates in the Epic and those in the Purāṇas at any cost, when it is absent within the Epic itself?...the systematization of the *yugas* and of the interventions of the *avatāra* is imperfect, constantly forgotten for the benefit of a particular myth, interest for which surpasses that for temporal reference" (*Faut-il*

à tout prix chercher la cohérence des dates entre l'épopée et les purāṇa, *alors qu'elle est absente à l'intérieur même de l'épopée?...la systématisation des* yuga *et des interventions de l'*avatāra *est imparfaite, sans cesse oubliée au profit d'un mythe particulier dont l'intérêt prime celui de la référence temporelle).* Biardeau 1976:154.

[36] In a two-part article in which she makes a detailed, albeit highly speculative, comparison of Nala's story and the Epic narrative, Biardeau (1984, 1985) considers the story of Nala to be a veiled description of a cosmic change that we are to understand as a change of yuga. For her, this is a reflection of the Epic story, which she views as an enactment of this change of yuga. Of importance to her argument in this article is her interpretation of the compound *kālaparyaya* at *Mbh* 3.176.19, which she sees as an indication that the adventures of the Pāṇḍavas during their years in exile take place at a "turning of time" (*tournant du temps*). However, her reading of *kālaparyaya* in this verse is questionable. One would rather expect *kālaparyāya* instead of *kālaparyaya* if a sense like a "turning of time" were intended, because *kālaparyaya* more frequently means simply a delay. It is true that these terms overlap in their semantic fields (see below, Chapter 5, note 18), but the context here makes Biardeau's reading very unlikely. The use of the indefinitizing *kasmāt* indicates that the sense is quite surely "in some time," "at a later time," as van Buitenen has taken it in his translation, and not "at the turning of time," which Biardeau prefers in order to support her interpretation of a reference to the end of a cosmic period. The text reads: *mokṣas te bhavitā rājan kasmāc cit kālaparyayāt,* "you will have your freedom, King, after some time has passed." For Biardeau's mention of *kālaparyaya,* see 1985:16, 20, 30. Like Biardeau, and probably influenced by her, Shulman (1994:19, ff.), in his own analysis of the Nala story, also works under the assumption that *kali* in this story refers to the yuga. As we have seen in our discussion of Nala's story (Chapter 2 above), such an assumption is unwarranted.

[37] *etat te sarvam ākhyātam atītānāgataṃ mayā / vāyuproktam anusmṛtya purāṇam ṛṣisaṃstutam //* 3.189.14. Van Buitenen translates: "the Lore... promulgated by the Wind God," cautiously avoiding identifying this lore directly with the *Vāyu Purāṇa.* Interestingly, however, he capitalizes the word 'lore,' which would indicate he considers this lore to be an already constituted text.

[38] Compare *Mbh* 3.186.56–77 to *VāP* 2.38.136–178.

[39] *VāP* 2.37.419–423; 2.36.103–125. In another section describing the

yugas and yugānta, the savior whose appearance ushers in the Kṛta Yuga is Pramiti, instead of Kalkin (1.58). There have been attempts to identify both Pramiti and Kalkin with historical rulers. See, for instance, Jayaswal 1917; for more references see R. S. Sharma 1982:197, and Rocher 1986:111.

[40] These are listed by the Epic's critical apparatus (4:642) as: 3.186.60-77, 122-129, and 187.1-47 corresponding to *Brahma Purāṇa* 52.4-8, 53.1-14, and 56.4-57.

[41] Hazra [1975] 1987:151; Rocher 1986:155.

[42] That the duration of the yugas was extended when no signs of the end of the world appeared, had already been suggested by Aiyer (according to Church 1970:90), and Basham 1967:323-324; see also Jayaswal 1917:146. I have also discussed this in González-Reimann 1988:95-101.

[43] 9.36.14-17; 13.18.25-26. These two passages are translated and discussed in Mitchiner 1986:10, 101-104.

[44] Mitchiner 1986:41-44.

[45] *YP* 8, 21, 24.

[46] It is also worth mentioning that the *Yuga Purāṇa* (36) blames Draupadī for the conflict, something the Epic does only indirectly when her birth is described and it is prophesied that she will cause the destruction of the *kṣatriyas* (1.155.44).

[47] Mitchiner 1986:81-82. For a thorough historical discussion, see pp. 49-76. For a brief synopsis, see Mitchiner 1990:321-322.

[48] Mitchiner 1986:71, 82. For an alternative explanation of the origin of the name of this Kṛta Era, see Sircar 1965:299-300.

[49] 3.186.30.

[50] Mitchiner 1986:41.

[51] Dwivedi 1979:290; Yadava 1978-1979:32, note 2; R. S. Sharma 1982:187-188. The yugānta sections of the *Vāyu* and the *Brahmāṇḍa* Purāṇas are placed in the third century C.E. by Hazra ([1975] 1987:171-175), and in the early part of the fourth by Pargiter ([1913] 1962a:55). Hein (1989:232) considers this brahmanical reaction in the third century to have been centered in the city of Mathurā, and writes that "The struggle between brahmanism and Yavanism [foreign influence] in the third century was one of the decisive contests in Indian

history, determining the nature of Indian culture for well over a millennium," (Hein 1989:227). Hazra ([1975] 1987:210-211) points out that the disruption of the brahmanical social order that these texts complain about is also reflected in the Buddhist Jātakas.

[52] For the incident see 2.63.10-15.

[53] *prāptaṃ kaliyugaṃ viddhi pratijñāṃ pāṇḍavasya ca / ānṛṇyaṃ yātu vairasya pratijñāyāś ca pāṇḍavaḥ //* 9.59.21.

[54] The past participle *prāptam*, "has arrived," could carry an inceptive force: "is arriving," "is about to arrive."

[55] It is striking, to begin with, that the players should not know about their position in the yuga scheme if it were really essential to the plot. Yudhiṣṭhira must learn about it from Mārkaṇḍeya, Bhīma from Hanumān, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra from Saṃjaya. Without these passages, they would remain ignorant concerning the subject. This is in sharp contrast to everyone's awareness of the central role played by time—in a broad sense—and destiny.

[56] Matilal 1991:411.

[57] 9.57.1-17. Kṛṣṇa's words in verse 4 are very straightforward: "Bhīmasena will not win by fighting according to dharma, so he should kill Suyodhana (Duryodhana) by unlawful combat," *bhīmasenas tu dharmeṇa yudhyamāno na jeṣyati / anyāyena tu yudhyan vai hanyād eṣa suyodhanam //*

[58] It is interesting that Matilal, in his discussion of the incident, never refers to the Kali Yuga explanation.

[59] See above, note 16.

[60] See below note 70.

[61] For Hanumān's version (3.148.16, 23, 26, 33), see Appendix B. Kṛṣṇa's statement, according to Mārkaṇḍeya, is: "My color is white in the Kṛta Yuga, yellow in the Tretā Yuga, red when Dvāpara arrives, and black in the Kali Yuga," *śvetaḥ kṛtayuge varṇaḥ pītas tretāyuge mama / rakto dvāparam āsādya kṛṣṇaḥ kaliyuge tathā //* 3.187.31.

[62] See above, note 35.

[63] Biardeau 1976:146, 173.

[64] Sörensen [1904] 1978, under *yuga* and *kali.*

[65] See above, note 61.

[66] See above, note 8.

[67] Hiltebeitel [1976] 1990:61, note 5. He also refers (ibid.), in passing, to Hopkins' opinion that Vyāsa's identification with Nārāyaṇa is late, and was not part of the early Epic. Nevertheless, to Hiltebeitel (ibid.), the fact that Vyāsa's name is Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana is enough to link him to Kṛṣṇa, to Draupadī, and, by extension, to Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. See also Hiltebeitel 1989: 93-94, in which he refers to the Nārāyaṇīya as an "isolated sectarian interpolation;" and 1993:19, where he acknowledges that "the Nārāyaṇīya is not part of the epic's main narrative."

[68] Hiltebeitel [1976] 1990:63.

[69] The unlikelihood of this symbolical reading of the blackness of the three players is further underscored by the fact that *pāṇḍu* means white. So the sons of Pāṇḍu, the five Pāṇḍava brothers, heroes of the Epic and husbands of the black Draupadī, could also be referred to as 'the white ones.' Furthermore, Arjuna means 'white' (*kṛṣṇa* and *arjuna* are used together in *Ṛg Veda* 6.9.1 to indicate the contrast between 'dark' and 'light'). This goes against any supposed implied allusion to the dark Kali Yuga in the colors incorporated into the names of the main players.

[70] The same is the case with Katz (1991:139-40), who, on this matter, generally follows both Biardeau and Hiltebeitel, despite some disagreements. Elsewhere, Katz (1989:175-186) explains the use of deceit, lies, and trickery on the part of the Epic's players as a consequence of the Kali Yuga, therefore making the yuga theory central to the plot ("...the reason deceit is absolutely necessary for the Pāṇḍavas in the war is that in the Kali age good cannot be expected to win by the natural, positive functioning of dharma...," p. 177). It is my contention that the opposite is the case, the story was easily associated with the Kali Yuga precisely because—among other things—it advocates the use of such adharmic means. The Kali Yuga provided a rationale for the unseemly behavior of the heroes. Another example of the acceptance of the Dvāpara-Kali transition as essential to the Epic is Thomas (1996:82-85). She argues that the Epic version of the story of Rāma Jāmadagnya—called Paraśurāma in the Purāṇas—can be better understood by bringing into the picture the theory of the yugas and his role as *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (although she acknowledges [p. 63, note] that he is not "consistently recognized" as an *avatāra* before the Purāṇas). We can also mention Jatavallabhula (1999:71, 81, 94, 99), for whom the assumption that the war takes place during the change from Dvāpara to Kali is important to her conclusions regarding the *Mbh* war as a ritual

sacrifice, "designed to meet and solve the peculiar problems posed by a specific time of crisis." Likewise, Whitaker (2000:107) suggests that the reason why Arjuna's weapons lose power and are withdrawn from him after Kṛṣṇa's death is that the Kali Yuga is beginning. The text, however, never makes such a connection and states simply that the weapons have already fulfilled their purpose (see Whitaker:104–106). Finally, Woods (2001:20, 129), following Biardeau, considers the change of yuga theme as essential in his analysis of the meaning of destiny and human action in the Epic. As already mentioned, the yuga theory can be, and has been, invoked in order to explain the events of the *Mahābhārata* (and the *Rāmāyaṇa*), but these will usually be later interpretations that take the connection between the Epic and the yugas as a given.

[71] Hiltebeitel [1976] 1990:288. Note Hiltebeitel's use of the term yugānta to refer to the end of the Dvāpara Yuga. Malamoud ([1989] 1996:159 (probably influenced by Biardeau) and Thomas (1996:82–85) use it the same way; and so does Jatavallabhula (1999:81) who, in addition, gives the erroneous impression that Sukthankar (1957:69) also uses the term and that he considers the change of yuga theme as essential. In fact, Sukthankar's only mention of the subject is to say, in passing, that "the epic poets think of [the war] as the beginning of the Kali Age, the Age of Iron" (1957:87). We have seen that, in the poem, this term carries a connotation of world destruction at the end of all four yugas, and it is meant as a metaphor, not a description. In this sense, it is misleading to refer to the end of the Dvāpara Yuga as a yugānta.

[72] As far as Draupadī is concerned, the text itself is quite explicit: "they called Kṛṣṇā (Draupadī) Kṛṣṇā because she was of *kṛṣṇa* (black) color," *kṛṣṇety evābruvan kṛṣṇāṃ kṛṣṇābhūt sā hi varṇataḥ*, 1.155.50. Hiltebeitel ([1976] 1990:63–76) actually explores different possible explanations for their blackness, but he seems to always view them within the change-of-yuga framework (ibid.:74). He pursues the matter further in Hiltebeitel 1984, and 1991. For an analysis of the symbolic meaning of black and white in this context, see Fitzgerald 1996:IV, D–IV, E.

[73] I had already touched on parts of this problem in González-Reimann 1988:131–134.

[74] See notes 17 and 18, above.

[75] There is only one such instance in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It reads: "[When] dharma eclipses adharma the Kṛta Yuga begins; when adharma eclipses dharma, Tiṣya (Kali) comes along," *dharmo vai grasate 'dharmaṃ tataḥ*

kṛtam abhūd yugaṃ/ adharmo grasate dharmaṃ tatas tiṣyaḥ pravartate//
Rām 6.26.13. The commentators are divided as to whether this means
that dharma creates the yugas or vice versa; see the notes by Goldman
et al. (forthcoming) to this verse.

[76] *tatas tiṣye ca samprāpte yuge kalipuraskṛte / ekapādasthito dharmo yatra*
tatra bhaviṣyati // 12.327.76.

[77] The verse is also important because it uses *kali* as an adjective to de-
scribe the conditions at the beginning of the fourth yuga. Even if Kali
is taken here as a personification, the meaning is ultimately the same.

[78] Jupiter in Puṣya, or—using the later solar constellations, the *rāśis*—
Jupiter in Cancer, was obviously considered as a particularly beneficial
planetary position at birth, especially with the Moon also present. Rāma
is said to have been born under such conditions (only in the southern
manuscripts of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, not in the CE, where the passage would
be after 1.17.5). In astrological terms, Jupiter in Cancer is exalted,
ucca, and the more exalted planets at birth the better. The passage
states that Rāma had five and, according to Kālidāsa (*Raghuvaṃśa*,
3.13) so did his ancestor, Raghu. Jain tradition talks of up to seven ex-
alted planets—an astronomical impossibility—in the case of Mahāvīra
(Kapadia 1952:41). And Aśvaghoṣa writes in his *Buddhacarita* (1.9)
that Buddha was born when Puṣya was propitious, *prasanna* (see Way-
man 1962:374).

[79] For the text and translation of the verse as well as of Sāyaṇa's com-
mentary, along with a discussion, see Appendix C. In his commentary,
Sāyaṇa explains the use of Puṣya for Kali by saying that in the Kali
Yuga adharma quickly becomes prominent, i.e. *puṣya*.

[80] The *Brahmāṇḍa* verse is 1.16.68–69 (Kirfel 1954:118). This Purāṇa is
very close to the *Vāyu*, and is one of the earliest Purāṇas (Hazra [1975]
1987:17–18; Rocher 1986:157). The verse in question is the one stating
that there are four yugas in the land of the Bhāratas (*Mbh* 6.11.3, see
Appendix A); for other Purāṇic occurrences, see e.g. the *Vāyu*
(1.57.22), the *Viṣṇu* (2.3.19), the *Matsya* (115.57), and the *Kūrma*
(1.45.43).

Chapter 4

The King and the Yugas

The Duties of the King

At the end of Pāṇḍavas' thirteen years of exile, when King Duryodhana refuses to hand over the throne to Yudhiṣṭhira as had been agreed, and a military confrontation seems inevitable, Kṛṣṇa makes an effort to convince Duryodhana that peace is better than war. After his attempt at diplomacy fails, Kṛṣṇa starts on his way back to rejoin the Pāṇḍavas. Before leaving, he pays a visit to Kuntī, who then seizes the opportunity to send a message to her son Yudhiṣṭhira. She urges Yudhiṣṭhira not to shy away from conflict, and to conquer his rightful throne by force. He must fulfill his duty as a *kṣatriya* and become a good ruler.

During the course of her admonitions, Kuntī explains that a ruler should follow his dharma and administer punitive justice (*daṇḍanīti*).[1] By doing so, the social order of the four *varṇas* will function properly, and dharma will be followed. If a king is a good, strict ruler, she declares, it will be the Kṛta Yuga, for the king's conduct influences the entire kingdom, and he therefore determines the yuga.

These are the relevant passages:

12. If a king practices dharma, he attains divine status; if he practices adharma, he goes to hell.

13. Punitive justice (*daṇḍanīti*) regulates the [social system of the] four *varṇas*, according to their respective dharmas. When

well administered by a ruler, it keeps [the subjects] away from adharma.

14. When a king relies properly and completely on punitive justice, then the best of times, the Kṛta Yuga, prevails.

15. As to whether the time [-period] determines the king [to act in a certain way], or the king [by the quality of his actions] determines the time; have no doubt, the king determines the time.

16. The king brings about the Kṛta Yuga, the Tretā and the Dvāpara. The king is the cause of the fourth yuga.

17. By bringing about the Kṛta, the king enjoys heaven forever; by bringing about the Tretā he enjoys heaven, but not forever. By establishing the Dvāpara he enjoys it in due proportion.

18. But an evil king lives in hell eternally, for the world is influenced by his faults, and he by the world's.[2]

These verses seem to imply that the king, by his conduct, can nullify the effect of the yugas caused by time. They actually go even further, by asserting that it is the king who causes the time (the yuga), instead of being subject to its influence. But is this really the import of these statements?

As it turns out, Kuntī's discourse is an abridged version of Bhīṣma's teachings to Yudhiṣṭhira on the administration of justice, as they appear much later in the Epic, in the Rājadharma, a section of the Śānti Parvan devoted to the duties of the king.[3] It is important to take into consideration the context in which these teachings appear in the Rājadharma.

They come after several chapters during which Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva and Bhīma, along with their wife Draupadī, try to dissuade Yudhiṣṭhira from giving up his royal duties and renouncing the world to become an ascetic, which is something he was considering as a consequence of his sorrow over the destruction of his relatives during the great war. They enjoin him to adhere to the duties of his *varṇa*, to fulfill his duties as king, and to take action instead of withdrawing.[4]

That Yudhiṣṭhira heed their call is, of course, crucial to the Epic's ethos. If he were to abandon his duties as king, the social

order would be in danger, as it is the king's responsibility to up-
hold it. If he were to follow the path of renunciation, he would
be slipping out of historical time, where dharma is of primary
importance, and which, as we have seen, establishes the frame-
work for the Epic, and he would then enter personal time, for
which the social order is totally irrelevant.

To Act or not to Act

Both Bhīṣma's discourse and Kuntī's use of some of his words
are, above all, a call to action as opposed to inaction.[5] They ex-
plain how important it is for the king to act—and to act prop-
erly—for the entire social and religious structure depends on him.
The mention of the yugas, and of the king as their maker, is, I
believe, of secondary importance. It is merely a way to emphasize
how important the king's actions are for the kingdom: if he acts
properly, he creates—as it were—a Kṛta Yuga; if he fails to act
properly and, more specifically, to administer punitive justice, he
creates a Kali Yuga. He creates good or bad times for the king-
dom according to how he conducts himself.

I would suggest that, originally, describing the king as the
maker of the yugas was probably no more than a metaphor, and
not a statement about the origin of the cosmic cycles of ascent
and descent of dharma.[6] As in other cases, however, the metaphor
was open to be interpreted literally by later redactors or com-
mentators.

The theme of the importance of action might give us a clue as
to how the king and the yugas came to be associated in this way.
There is another passage, this time in Book Three, where Drau-
padī preaches to Yudhiṣṭhira on the importance of action. It is in
one of the sections where the conflict between destiny and free
will are discussed.[7]

During the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the forest, a heated exchange
takes place between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira. She complains
that he shows no anger towards Duryodhana and his cohorts and
is too patient with them, to which he replies with a teaching on

the dangers of being controlled by anger, and on the virtues of patience. Draupadī further charges that he is confused, and that destiny controls everything, an assertion that he now interprets as an attack on the workings of dharma.[8] She reacts by moderating her position and explaining that such was not her intention, for leaving everything to fate accomplishes nothing: one must determine a goal, and then act upon it.[9] She explains that there are three factors that determine the outcome of things: fate (*daiva*), chance (*haṭha*), and action, that is, human effort (*karman/puruṣa prayatna*).[10] It is very important to act, for only then is a positive outcome possible, while nothing good comes from inertia and inactivity.[11]

In her words:

> 'One must act,'[12] this is Manu's pronouncement; a lazy man is always defeated.

> Here [in this world], Yudhiṣṭhira, he who acts generally meets with great success, while a lazy person never does.

> Bad luck takes hold of the lazy man who is lying down, whereas a competent person obtains definite rewards, and enjoys good fortune.[13]

And a little further on:

> He who acts should not despair [saying] 'I cannot succeed,' Bhārata. There are two [possible outcomes] of the act: success or failure, but abstaining from acting is another matter.

> It is by a combination of many conditions that an act succeeds, if a condition is missing, either the result is incomplete or there is no result at all. But if one does not [even] act, Acyuta (Yudhiṣṭhira), there is neither result nor merit to be seen.[14]

Draupadī indicates that she is quoting Manu, and I shall attempt to identify the source of her quote. But first, let us recall the two verses from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* cited in a previous chapter—during the discussion on the use of the names of the dice throws for indicating good and bad fortune—and now add a third verse:[15]

> The fortune (*bhaga*) of one who is sitting down, sits down; that
> of one who is standing, stands up. That of one who is lying
> down, lies down; the fortune of one who keeps moving, moves.
>
> Lying down one becomes Kali; getting up, Dvāpara. Standing,
> one becomes Tretā; by moving, one becomes Kṛta.
>
> By moving one obtains honey, by moving one obtains the sweet-
> tasting udumbara fruit. Look at the splendor of the Sun! He does
> not get tired of moving (or: he is not lazy about moving). [16]

This is clearly also a call to action, although it refers more spe-
cifically to movement. It is worth noting that the verbal root used
here is *car*, which includes a range of meanings having to do
with moving, wandering, acting, performing, behaving, and being
engaged in something. It may be remembered that these were the
words of the god Indra to Rohita, while exhorting him to keep
wandering and not to return to his village. The names of the dice
throws are used as an illustration, in order to make the point that
being idle can only bring bad fortune, while movement/action
will bring good fortune. These names are here applied to what
was probably common terminology when comparing action to
inaction, laziness or sluggishness. A verse in the Buddhist Pali
Canon, for instance, states:

> Standing, moving, sitting, or lying down, as long as one is alert,
> one should practice mindfulness (*sati*)...[17]

From Dice Throws to Yugas

We can now turn to the section of Manu's law book, the *Mānava
Dharma Śāstra*, from which Draupadī is probably quoting. As it
turns out, these verses from Manu are based on our *Aitareya
Brāhmaṇa* verses, but with some important modifications.
They read as follows:

> He should renew his actions energetically over again every time
> he gets tired, for good fortune follows the man who acts with
> energy.

> The sum of the king's actions determines the Kṛta, the Tretā Yuga, the Dvāpara and the Kali, for the king is said to be the yuga.
>
> Asleep, he becomes the Kali; awake, the Dvāpara Yuga; ready to act, the Tretā; and when acting, the Kṛta Yuga.[18]

The first thing to be pointed out here is that this appears in a section of the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* that deals with the duties of the king and how he should run the affairs of the kingdom. So the Brāhmaṇa's general call to action in order to avert bad fortune and bring about good fortune is now specifically applied to the king and the need for him to fulfill his royal duties and, thus, uphold the social order.

In the second place, and very importantly, the Brāhmaṇa verse that mentions the dice throws as an illustration has now been construed as referring to the yugas, and an additional verse has been added preceding it, a verse that states unequivocally that the king, by his actions, determines the yuga.[19] The metaphor of the dice throws has now become a yuga metaphor.

The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* says that a lazy man who does not act is like the losing throw, and will encounter bad fortune, whereas one who keeps moving and acts is like the winning throw, and will have good fortune. Manu, however, has turned this into a statement asserting that the king should act indefatigably—like the Sun in the Brāhmaṇa verse—and that the king's actions, or his lack thereof, will entail good or bad luck, not only for himself, but for the entire kingdom, and this is expressed by construing Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali as a reference to the yugas.

The king will not simply attain *kali* luck or *kṛta* luck, he will become the Kali or the Kṛta Yuga. He will create Kali-like or Kṛta-like conditions, depending on whether he acts energetically and properly or not. He will, in effect, be the maker of the yuga. But, again, this surely must be understood more as an illustration, a metaphor, than as a statement concerning the origin of the cosmic cycles.[20]

There is clearly a connection between the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* verses and Manu's verses, and the latter are, in turn, related to

Draupadī's discourse on the need for Yudhiṣṭhira to take action. By extension, all three are also related to Bhīṣma's and Kuntī's discourses to Yudhiṣṭhira. There is a common thread here that reflects an attempt to counter the strong fatalistic tone of the Epic's story line. The Epic, as we have seen, must remain within historical time, that is, time as it applies to the social order, which is kept functioning properly through adherence to dharma, and where destiny plays an important role. Yudhiṣṭhira, it would seem, needs to be reminded occasionally of the fact that he must remain in historical time, he must live in the world and perform his duties as king.

He cannot, however, simply sit back passively and let events unfold by themselves. He must take action, first to regain the kingdom that is rightfully his, and then to rule it properly. This means that even within the strictures imposed by destiny, he must exercise some degree of free will. In fact, a balance of sorts is reached here between the two extreme and conflicting views of either letting destiny run its course (historical time), or exercising free will in order to break free from the bondage of the world (personal time). Yudhiṣṭhira cannot leave behind his dharmic responsibilities as king, but neither can he remain idle and let destiny take over. This, then, is a narrowed-down version of free will, a free will within the boundaries of historical time.[21] He must act, and he must influence the outcome of events; as king, he must act and create a dharmic and prosperous kingdom.

The ultimate metaphor for the importance of his conduct and the way it affects the kingdom, is to say that by his actions he creates one or another yuga, for it is the succession of the four yugas that determines the condition of dharma in the world. In fact, the king is not only said to create the yugas, he is also said to be the creator of living beings, as at the end of the following passage, in which Bhīṣma recounts to Yudhiṣṭhira the words of Utathya concerning the duties of a king:

> 1. When Parjanya (the rain god) rains in season and the king behaves according to dharma, the resulting prosperity keeps the people happy.

2. A washerman who does not know how to remove dirt from clothes, or how to clean dyed [garments], is not really [a washerman].

3. Likewise, those among the *brāhmaṇas*, the *kṣatriyas*, and the *vaiśyas* who perform acts that are different [from their prescribed ones], they are the *śūdras* of the four *varṇas*.

4. Labor is for the *śūdra*, agriculture for the *vaiśya*, and punitive justice for the king. Celibacy, austerities, mantras and the truth are for the *brāhmaṇas*.

5. The *kṣatriya* from among them who knows how to completely remove the blemishes in the conduct [of the four *varṇas*]—as [a washerman] cleans clothes—he is the father, he is the lord of creatures (Prajāpati).

6. The sum of the king's actions, bull of the Bhāratas, determines the Kṛta, the Tretā, the Dvāpara and the Kali, for the king alone is said to be the yuga.

7. The four *varṇas*, the Vedas, and the four stages of life (*āśramas*), all get confused if the king neglects his duties.

8. The king is the creator of all beings, the king is their destroyer. If he follows dharma, he is the creator; if he follows adharma, he is the destroyer.[22]

This last verse is not an attempt at usurping the functions of the creator god, but merely another metaphor used to emphasize the importance of the king. The use of hyperbole is frequent in descriptions of the king (as it is throughout the Epics and the Purāṇas): the king is everything, and everything depends on him.

A few verses later, there is one verse that highlights the ambiguity in the use of the term *kali* in some of these passages:

Wherever those who are known to be wicked live among the virtuous, misfortune (*kali*) overtakes kings. When the king punishes men who do not deserve punishment, the kingdom does not prosper, O king![23]

Here it is *kali* that overtakes the king, and it probably should be understood simply as misfortune.

That the king's role as 'creator' of the yugas was not in opposition to the yugas created by time, can be gleaned at from the following verses in the Mokṣadharma of the Śānti Parvan. It is, once again, Bhīṣma recounting an ancient conversation to Yudhiṣṭhira; this time, Satyavat explains to his father, King Dyumatsena, that a king should behave properly and exercise self-control before punishing others. He says that:

> The king followed this cardinal rule in the Kṛta Yuga. In the Tretā Yuga he should follow three-fourths of dharma; in the Dvāpara, two; and in the last yuga, one.

> In the Kali Yuga, the bad conduct of kings [further enhances] the characteristics of the time [-period] and, as a result, there is [only] a sixteenth part of dharma left. [24]

This sixteenth part of dharma implies that there is only a fourth of a fourth of dharma left, as if the bad conduct of a king in the Kali Yuga could create a Kali Yuga within the Kali Yuga. In other words, the king's 'Kali Yuga' must still take place within the Kali Yuga brought about by time.

It then seems clear that, in the *Mahābhārata*, asserting that the king 'makes' the yuga is merely a way of stressing the importance of his behavior as ruler. His actions can 'make or break' the kingdom. The idea that the king makes the yuga became a formula that could be used whenever the importance of the king's actions was described.

The Importance of Punishment

There is another aspect of these passages concerning the king and the yugas that deserves comment: they all emphasize the need for punishment in order to maintain the brahmanical social order. These verses reflect a serious concern with the breakup of the social structure embodied by the four *varṇas* and their well-established, stratified division of social classes. This concern is reflected in the yuga theory itself, with its emphasis on the decline of dharma from one yuga to the next, but these sections dealing with punitive justice, and perhaps even more so those dealing

with yugānta, show a sense of urgency that goes beyond simply expounding the need to respect one's own duties. Although this need to follow one's dharma is of great importance to the Epic, it is also true that it is mainly with the dharma of *kṣatriyas* and kings that the poem is concerned.

This intense preoccupation with the total disruption of the *varṇas* and with their intermingling (*varṇasaṃkara*), and, especially, with the lack of respect for the *brāhmaṇas*, seems removed from the Epic's story. Just as in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira's worries about the end of the Kali Yuga, the yugānta, in the dialogue with Mārkaṇḍeya, these sections are probably later, and constitute a reaction on the part of the *brāhmaṇa* class to real social conditions, conditions that bear no direct connection to the conflict between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas.

As Pollock has remarked of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* while discussing its representation of kingship in the Ayodhyākāṇḍa (Book Two), "the *Rāmāyaṇa* appears to derive much of its meaning from its intense engagement with the conditions of social and political existence."[25] These passages of the *Mahābhārata* undoubtedly are the product of a period in which the brahmanic establishment felt genuinely threatened and, as it were, issued guidelines for its own preservation.

Immediately following the Rājadharma section of the Śānti Parvan comes the Āpaddharma, which, although basically a continuation of the Rājadharma, gives instructions on the proper course of action during dangerous or difficult (*āpad*) times, when exceptions to the general rule are acceptable. In the Āpaddharma, Bhīṣma quotes the words of Śakra (Indra) to Yudhiṣṭhira, explaining that, in difficult times, a king should "constantly suppress the unruly who don't conform to established order, and protect those who are disciplined."[26]

In the previous chapter, Bhīṣma had made use of the metaphor of the king as maker of the yugas:

> O great king, the king is the root of the security of property, of good rains, of disease among the people, of death, and of dangers.

Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali, bull of the Bhāratas, are all caused by the king; I have no doubt about this.[27]

The often-stated concern of these passages with the disruption of the brahmanical social order, and the importance given to punishment as a means to preserve that order, can surely be associated with the menacing foreign invasions and the growth of heterodox movements that the sections on yugānta complain about.

Historically, this covers a broad period that spans several centuries; from the Mauryan empire in the third century B.C.E., to the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century C.E. When the Mauryan emperor Aśoka embraced Buddhism and showed respect for other sects, he legitimized and empowered the heterodox movements. And after the fall of the Mauryas, successive foreign incursions shook the brahmanic establishment, which, with the exception of some brief periods of political favor, had to struggle in order to keep its influence on society. When the Guptas arrived on the scene, they fostered the return of political and religious power into the hands of the *brāhmaṇa* class, and this allowed for the revival of brahmanic religious ideas, and the establishment of what we now call Hinduism. It was the result of a long period of transition during which Vedic brahmanic religious ideas were transformed and updated, and non-Vedic ideas and beliefs were incorporated into the brahmanic fold as a reaction to changing social, religious and economic conditions.[28]

During the reign of the Guptas, when the brahmanic social order was again firmly established, the declaration of the king's role as guardian of the *varṇa-āśrama* dharma became a mere cliché used by poets when singing the praises of the king;[29] it no longer reflected the urgency felt in previous centuries.

The Epic sections on punitive justice probably belong in the latter part of this broad time range, as suggested by R.S. Sharma,[30] who believes that they—together with the yugānta passages—should be placed in the third century C.E. It is possible, however, that an earlier form of these ideas could date back one or two centuries prior to this.

Creating a New 'Kṛta Yuga'

As for the connection between the actions of the king and the
yugas, from the time of the Guptas onward there are some in-
scriptions that proclaim that a certain king has established the
ways of the Kṛta Yuga, or has destroyed the evil procedures of
Kali.[31] In an inscription from the sixth century that praises a cer-
tain Dharmadhoṣa, a minister of King Viṣṇuvardhana of Mālava,
the minister is referred to as he:

> Who made this kingdom secure, without conflicts, and free by
> decree from any intermingling of the *varṇas*, as if it were in the
> Kṛta [Yuga].[32]

As in the case of the king as protector of the *varṇa-āśrama*
dharma, this was probably no more than a formula intended to
present the king as a virtuous upholder of the traditional social
order.

There is an interesting tradition about the king and the yugas
that evolved, not out of the *Mahābhārata*, but out of the
Rāmāyaṇa. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, the dharmic and glorious
rule of Rāma after he defeated Rāvaṇa and recovered his wife
Sītā was compared to the Kṛta Yuga.[33] In fact, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s
description of Rāma's rule consists of most of the standard char-
acteristics of the Kṛta Yuga. People were healthy, well-fed,
happy, they lived long lives, and they followed dharma. There
were no widows, it rained in season, and vegetation was abun-
dant. No natural calamities occurred, and members of the four
varṇas adhered to their own duties.[34]

The currency of these comparisons during the Gupta period is
illustrated by their appearance in Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā* (4th
century C.E.?), a Sanskrit retelling of some of the older Buddhist
Pali Jātakas. The poet compares a prosperous kingdom to the
Kṛta Yuga in a way that is very similar to the comparison made
in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For the people of this bountiful kingdom it was
"as if they were in the Kṛta Yuga," and "as if the Kṛta Yuga had
arrived."[35] Another king was so fond of giving (*dāna*), that he
"showered gifts like a cloud of the Kṛta Yuga."[36]

The comparison of Rāma's rule to the Kṛta Yuga was to be frequently invoked centuries later, during the period when the story of Rāma was retold in various languages, between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries C.E. The idealized image of Rāma's rule, *rāmarājya* (*rāmrāj* in Hindi), started being used effectively for political purposes, whether as a justification for monarchy, as suggested by Thapar,[37] or as a reaction against the powerful invasions of Muslim Turkic peoples and the eventual establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, as proposed by Pollock.[38]

Pollock cites a historical poem from the twelfth century that identifies King Pṛthvīrāja of Ajmer with Rāma, and states that when Pṛthvīrāja rules "the earth becomes a site of the riches and joys of *rāmarājya* in the very midst of the Kali age."[39] Note, however, that this ideal rule, this *rāmarājya*, is still said to take place within the Kali Yuga.

The most popular and well-known of the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas, composed in Hindi in the sixteenth century. Tulsi describes Rāma's rule in glowing terms, and says that during his reign people behaved as in the Kṛta Yuga even though it was the Tretā, the latter being the yuga in which the action of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is placed.[40] Tulsidas' vision of *rāmrāj* has been influential in millenarian movements and was appropriated by political currents of the late twentieth century.[41] But Tulsi himself was not suggesting that a dharmic king would turn the Kali Yuga into Kṛta. Instead, as has been cogently argued by Lutgendorf, *rāmrāj*, as a real social condition, constituted for him a lofty ideal, something of the past. For Tulsi, the 'realistic' way to attain the state of perfection implicit in *rāmrāj* was by means of personal devotion, by following the prescribed procedure for spiritual attainment in the Kali Yuga, as put forth by the *vaiṣṇava bhakti* tradition: the repetition of the name of Hari/Viṣṇu, in this case, in his manifestation as Rāma.[42] The yugas created by time, therefore, remain untouched.

Let us now return to the *Mahābhārata*. There is a verse in the Nārāyaṇīya that also proclaims that the Kṛta Yuga can be summoned by following certain practices. In this case, however, it is

not the king's behavior that will create the Kṛta Yuga, but the collective conduct of the true followers of Nārāyaṇa:

> If the world were filled with people of single devotion (to Nārāyaṇa), son of Kuru, who practiced non-injury (*ahiṃsā*), who knew the soul (*ātman*), and who had a good disposition towards all beings, the Kṛta Yuga would begin, and wishes [would be granted] without the need for [ritual] acts.[43]

As with the sections on the king and the yugas, this statement appears more like a metaphor than an actual prediction concerning cosmic cycles. The message is that the world would be a better place if there were more devoted followers of Nārāyaṇa. We could also probably consider this as an appropriation of the yuga theory for the purpose of advancing Bhāgavata or Pāñcarātra beliefs, just as we could view the statements about the Kṛta Yuga being brought about by the king's practice of punitive justice, as an appropriation of the yugas for legitimizing the king's authority.[44]

These are two radically different interpretations of the Kṛta Yuga, and of the yugas in general. In one case, the king establishes the Kṛta by force, as it were, by seeing to it that nobody steps beyond their established social boundaries; and this brings prosperity to the kingdom. In the other case, in what would be a more 'democratic' alternative, if there is a sufficient number of virtuous followers of Nārāyaṇa, it is they who, by their conduct, will cause the Kṛta Yuga to begin.

In the Purāṇas, especially the later ones, the negative influence of the Kali Yuga was sometimes considered to be canceled, or countered, under certain circumstances. So, for instance, the *Skanda Purāṇa* declares that the sacred city of Kāśī (Banaras) is out of the reach of negative cosmic influences:

> It is always the Kṛta Yuga here, always a great festival; the rising and setting of the planets has no negative effect in Viśveśvarāśrama.

> In the abode of Viśveśvara (Śiva) [i.e., in Kāśī] it is always the auspicious half of the year, there is always good fortune, always

happiness.[45]

And, in what seems like an update of the verse from the Nārāyaṇīya just quoted,[46] the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* (16th century?) states that the onset of the Kali Yuga could be postponed for 10,000 years by the presence of true Vaiṣṇavas.[47]

In our final example, the Kāśī Rahasya, a purported appendix to the *Brahmavaivarta*, says that Kali can also be an inner state:

> The embodied Kali does not enter here and torture people; [but] wherever thoughts are impure, people call that Kali.[48]

These are all later attempts at cancelling or neutralizing the terrible effects of Kali. However, the ultimate remedy for the evils of the Kali Yuga is not a partial protective shield, whether by being at a holy site or by following a certain religious path, although these can offer solace to the individual. Nor is it the establishment of a *rāmrāj* which creates conditions like those of the Kṛta Yuga. The real solution for society at large, as we shall see in the last chapter, is an actual change of yuga brought about by the rotation of the wheel of time: the end of Kali, and the beginning of a new Kṛta Yuga.

Notes

[1] *Daṇḍanīti* literally means "the science of the rod [of punishment]." It implies a justice enforced through severe punishment. I have translated it as punitive justice, in an attempt to convey the sense of "justice enforced through punishment," but the word 'punitive' should not be taken to imply that the term *daṇḍanīti* has a negative connotation in the texts.

[2] 12. *rājā carati ced dharmaṃ devatvāyaiva kalpate / sa ced adharmaṃ carati narakāyaiva gacchati // 13. daṇḍanītiḥ svadharmeṇa cāturvarṇyaṃ niyacchati / prayuktā svāminā samyag adharmebhyaś ca yacchati // 14. daṇḍanītyāṃ yadā rājā samyak kārtsnyena vartate / tadā kṛtayugaṃ nāma kālaḥ śreṣṭhaḥ pravartate // 15. kālo vā kāraṇaṃ rājño rājā vā kālakāraṇam / iti te saṃśayo mā bhūd rājā kālasya kāraṇam // 16. rājā kṛtayugasraṣṭā tretāyā dvāparasya ca / yugasya ca caturthasya rājā bhavati kāraṇam // 17. kṛtasya kāraṇād rājā svargam atyantam aśnute / tretāyāḥ kāraṇād rājā svar-*

gaṃ nātyantam aśnute / pravartanād dvāparasya yathābhāgam upāśnute // 18. *tato vasati duṣkarmā narake śāśvatīḥ samāḥ / rājadoṣeṇa hi jagat spṛśyate jagataḥ sa ca //* 5.130.12–18.

3 The passage in the Śānti Parvan is 12.70, which I have translated in Appendix D. In the notes to the translation of 12.70, the verses quoted above are identified, with the exception of 5.130.12, which is not taken from that chapter.

4 12.7–16.

5 This theme of action vs. inaction is, of course, also developed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Note, by the way, that Kuntī's use, in Book 5, of verses from Book 12, implies that her words are a later addition. The Epic is quoting itself here.

6 That a prosperous kingdom could be metaphorically described by mentioning the Kṛta Yuga is made clear in the detailed portrayal of the happy kingdom of the Kurus after the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura, when Bhīṣma was regent and upheld dharma. The text asserts that "even in the provinces of the kingdom it was the Kṛta Yuga," 1.102.5. For the entire passage see Appendix E.

7 I had already referred to this passage in Chapter 1, note 67.

8 The entire section is 3.28–33.

9 "One first establishes goals mentally, and later accomplishes them through action," *manasārthān viniścitya paścāt prāpnoti karmaṇā*, 3.33.23.

10 3.33.30–32.

11 Sitting idly and sleeping are associated with letting fate run things (3.33.12), while a man can obtain results by his own actions (3.33.16).

12 Literally, "The act must be done," *kartavyaṃ tv eva karma*.

13 *kartavyaṃ tv eva karmeti manor eṣa viniścayaḥ / ekāntena hy anīho 'yaṃ parābhavati pūruṣaḥ // kurvato hi bhavaty eva prāyeṇeha yudhiṣṭhira / ekāntaphalasiddhiṃ tu na vindaty alasaḥ kvacit // alakṣmīr āviśaty enaṃ śayānam alasaṃ naram / niḥsaṃśayaṃ phalaṃ labdhvā dakṣo bhūtim upāśnute //* 3.33.36–37, 39.

14 *kurvato nārthasiddhir me bhavatīti ha bhārata / nirvedo nātra gantavyo dvāv etau hy asya`karmaṇaḥ / siddhir vāpyatha vāsiddhir apravṛttir ato 'nyathā // bahūnāṃ samavāye hi bhāvānāṃ karma sidhyati / guṇābhāve phalaṃ nyūnaṃ bhavaty. aphalam eva vā / anārambhe tu na phalaṃ na guṇo dṛśyate 'cyuta //* 3.33.47–48.

15 See Chapter 2 above.

[16] *āste bhaga āsīnasyordhvas tiṣṭhati tiṣṭhataḥ / śete nipadyamānasya carāti carato bhaga // kaliḥ śayāno bhavati saṃjihānas tu dvāparaḥ / uttiṣṭhaṃs tretā bhavati kṛtaṃ saṃpadyate caran // caran vai madhu vindati caran svādum udumbaram/ sūryasya paśya śremāṇam yo na tandrayate caran// AB* 7.15 (33.3.3-5).

[17] *tiṭṭhaṃ caraṃ nisinno vā sayāno vā yāvat' assa vigatamiddho, etaṃ satiṃ adhiṭṭheyya... Sutta Nipāta* 1.8.151 (Uragavagga), Pali Text Society ed. p. 26. A similar idea appears in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.2.11.2 (Catukka Nipāta), PTS ed. vol. 2, p. 14.

[18] *ārabhetaiva karmāṇi śrāntaḥ śrāntaḥ punaḥ punaḥ / karmāṇy ārabhamāṇam hi puruṣaṃ śrīr niṣevate// kṛtaṃ tretāyugaṃ caiva dvāparaṃ kalir eva ca / rājño vṛttāni sarvāṇi rājā hi yugam ucyate // kaliḥ prasupto bhavati sa jāgrad dvāparaṃ yugam / karmasv abhyudyatas tretā vicaraṃs tu kṛtaṃ yugam // MDhŚ* 9.300-302. This passage does not include Draupadī's exact quote, but the ideas expressed are the same. The *Mbh* is probably either paraphrasing or quoting from an earlier version of Manu's text.

[19] Sāyaṇa, probably influenced by Manu, takes the *AB* verse as a reference to the yugas (as he does with the *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* verse, see Appendix C), and, after him, so do several modern scholars. But the context in which the *AB* verse appears does not warrant such an interpretation, as pointed out by Keith [1920] 1981:303, note 6. This is, no doubt, yet another instance of reading the Purāṇic yugas into an earlier text.

[20] When viewed in this way, all these statements about the king creating the yugas cannot be considered as evidence that the cyclical view of time is not prevalent in Hinduism, as some scholars have done (see Upadhyay 1979:178; and Arvind Sharma [1974] 1992:208). In any case, it must also be remembered that these texts represent a somewhat early stage in the formation of the yuga theory.

[21] As we have seen in Chapter 1, attempts to exalt free will without advocating renunciation end up positing free will as subordinate to, or as working together with destiny.

[22] 1. *kālavarṣī ca parjanyo dharmacārī ca pārthivaḥ / saṃpad yadaiṣā bhavati sā bibharti sukhaṃ prajāḥ //* 2. *yo na jānāti nirhantuṃ vastrāṇāṃ rajako malam / raktāni vā śodhayituṃ yathā nāsti tathaiva saḥ //* 3. *evam eva dvijendrāṇāṃ kṣatriyāṇāṃ viśām api / śūdrāś caturṇāṃ varṇānāṃ nānākarmasv avasthitāḥ //* 4. *karma śūdre kṛṣīr vaiśye daṇḍanītiś ca rājani / brahmacaryaṃ tapo mantrāḥ satyaṃ cāpi dvijātiṣu //* 5. *teṣāṃ yaḥ kṣatriyo veda vastrāṇām iva śodhanam / śīladoṣān vinirhantuṃ sa pitā sa prajāpatiḥ //* 6.

kṛtaṃ tretā dvāparaś ca kaliś ca bharatarṣabha / rājavṛttāni sarvāṇi rājaiva yugam ucyate // 7. *cāturvarṇyaṃ tathā vedāś cāturāśramyam eva ca / sarvaṃ pramuhyate hy etad yadā rājā pramādyati //* 8. *rājaiva kartā bhūtānāṃ rājaiva ca vināśakaḥ / dharmātmā yaḥ sa kartā syād adharmātmā vināśakaḥ //* 12.92.1–8.

[23] *yatra pāpā jñāyamānāś caranti satāṃ kalir vindati tatra rājñaḥ / yadā rājā śāsti narānn aśiṣyān na tad rājyaṃ vardhate bhūmipāla //* 12.92.27.

[24] I have rendered the second of these verses in a way that I believe reflects its intended meaning. It literally reads: "When the Kali Yuga has arrived, by the bad conduct of kings, by the characteristics of the time, there will be a sixteenth part of dharma." *etatprathamakalpena rājā kṛtayuge 'bhajat / pādonenāpi dharmeṇa gacchet tretāyuge tathā / dvāpare tù dvipādena pādena tv apare yuge // tathā kaliyuge prāpte rājñāṃ duścaritena ha / bhavet kālaviśeṣeṇa kalā dharmasya ṣoḍaśī //* 12.259.32–33.

[25] Pollock 1986:14.

[26] *aśiṣṭanigraho nityaṃ śiṣṭasya paripālanam,* 12.140.33.

[27] *rājamūlā mahārāja yogakṣemasuvṛṣṭayaḥ / prajāsu vyādhayaś caiva maraṇaṃ ca bhayāni ca // kṛtaṃ tretā dvāparaś ca kaliś ca bharatarṣabha / rājamūlāni sarvāṇi mama nāsty atra saṃśayaḥ //* 12.139.9–10. After these verses, Bhīṣma explains that at the end of Tretā and the beginning of Dvāpara, a terrible drought occurred and dharma was destroyed. He uses the term *yugānta* for this period (12.139.14), but this is rare, for, as we have seen, *yugānta* represents the end of all four yugas.

[28] For a study of the period under discussion see Upadhyay 1979. See also Selvanayagam 1992, Olivelle 1993:55–64, and Sutton 1997. For a discussion of the role played by the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* in the transition from Vedism to Hinduism, see, respectively, the introduction to van Buitenen 1981, and the introduction to Doniger and Smith 1991.

[29] Olivelle 1993:202.

[30] R. S. Sharma 1982:188, 196–97.

[31] See Upadhyay 1978:179, 218; and Inden 1990:248.

[32] *Vihitasakalavarṇṇāsaṅkaraṃ śāntaḍīṃbaṃ kṛta iva kṛtam etad yena rājyaṃ nirādhi,* "Mandasor Stone Inscription of Yaśodharman and Viṣṇuvardhana," (dated 533–34 C.E.), line 17, Fleet [1888] 1963:154.

[33] Things were "like in the Kṛta Yuga," *yathā kṛtayuge tathā, Rām* 1.1.73.

[34] *Rām* 1.1.71–73; 6.116.80 ff. (6.131, vol. 3:370–71, in Raghunathan's

translation); 7.89.7 ff. (7.99, vol. 3:610–11, in Raghunathan). Interest-ingly, the king is identified with time and the yugas in a late interpola-tion to the Uttarakāṇḍa, the last book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: "the king is time and the yuga, the king is all this world," *rājā kālo yugaś caiva rājā sarvaṃ idaṃ jagat*, Uttarakāṇḍa, Appendix 1, No. 8, line 372 (Canto 2, after 59, in Raghunathan's translation, vol. 3:543).

[35] *...kṛta iva yuge babhūvuḥ* / *...kṛtam ivātra yugaṃ samapadyata* // *Jātaka-mālā* 10.19, 30. For the difficulties in dating Ārya Śūra, see Khoroche 1989:xii–xiii.

[36] *dānavarṣaṃ kṛtayugamegha iva vavarṣa* / *Jātakamālā* 2.4.

[37] Thapar 1989:15.

[38] Pollock 1993:277 ff.

[39] Pollock ibid.:276.

[40] More literally, it was "the behavior/actions of Kṛta appearing in Tretā," *tretā bhai kṛtajug kai karnī*, (7.22.6). Prasad translates this line as: "even in the Tretayuga every feature of the Satyayuga was re-peated;" and Lutgendorf's (p. 372) rendering is: "the Krita Age reap-peared in the Treta."

[41] See Lutgendorf 1991:371 ff.; Lutgendorf 1995; Pollock 1993, passim; and Pandey 1988:258 ff. See also Chapter 6 below.

[42] Lutgendorf 1991:392. See Tulsi's text at 7.102a, b; 7.103a (translated in Lutgendorf, p. 373).

[43] *yady ekāntibhir ākīrṇaṃ jagat syāt kurunandana* / *āhiṃsakair ātmavidbhir sarvabhūtahite rataiḥ* / *bhavet kṛtayugaprāptir āśīḥ karmavivarjitaiḥ* // 12.336.58.

[44] It is noteworthy that in his *Rāmcaritmānas* (7.22), Tulsidas says that during Rāma's reign there was no rod (*daṃḍa*, in Hindi), except for those carried by ascetics. In other words, during Rāma's Kṛta-like reign, there was no need for punishment. This contradicts the idea that punishment is necessary in order to keep the Kṛta Yuga in place, an idea that was already present in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* (7.70.5–10).

[45] *sadā kṛtayugaṃ cātra mahāparva sadā 'tra vai* / *na grahāstodayakṛto doṣo viśveśvarāśrame* // *sadā saumyāyanaṃ tatra sadā tatra mahodayaḥ* / *sadaiva maṅgalaṃ tatra yatra viśveśvarasthitiḥ* // *Skanda Purāṇa* 4.22.86–87. The auspicious half of the year (*saumyāyana* or *uttarāyaṇa*) begins at the winter solstice, and ends at the summer solstice. This chapter of the Purāṇa is considered by Eck (1983:347) to be not earlier than the 13th

century. On the belief that the city of Banaras can be beyond time, see Eck 1983:279–282.

[46] Note 43 above.

[47] See Appendix F for references and the translation of a relevant passage from the *Brahmavaivarta*.

[48] (pra) *pīḍayen na janān atra kalir viśati mūrtimān / tasya tasyā 'śubhā buddhiḥ kalir ity ucyate nṛbhiḥ //* KR 17.74. According to Eck (1983:347), the Kāśī Rahasya dates from the 14th to the 17th centuries.

Chapter 5

The Yuga System becomes
Part of the *Mahābhārata*

A *'kali'* Epic Poem

After the analyses of the previous chapters we are in a better position to understand the relationship between the yuga theory and the *Mahābhārata*, and to attempt to explain how this relationship came about. We know that time (*kāla*), as a destructive force, plays a prominent role in the Epic. It is blamed for the tragic destruction of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, and it is seen as an overpowering force that cannot be overcome as long as one lives within the social structure, in historical time. This social structure implies the division into *varṇas*, and the need for the members of each social class to adhere to their own prescribed duties and roles in society. Time is also closely linked to destiny: it brings to fruition the lot of every individual, family and social group.

We also know that the game of dice plays a fundamental role in the Epic, as it was the fateful dicing match between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana that set off the conflict. This is clearly acknowledged by the text when it blames the match for the ensuing tragedy. It is fitting that what sets in motion the destructive chain of events that culminates with the extermination of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas is a game of dice, for, besides the ritual background of the dice game and its possible significance as an element of Yudhiṣṭhira's consecration ceremony, it is important to keep in mind that, since the time of the *Ṛg Veda*, dice had been

considered as an expression of the workings of fate, a symbol for events that depend on the gods and are beyond human control.[1] This establishes a well-rounded symbolical scheme in which time, dice and fate are blamed for the conflict; or more precisely, time and fate are the cause of the conflict, while dice act as their instrument.

We have also established that the names of the dice throws, Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, and Kali, are used for describing events or for grading the relative merits of something. This is particularly important in the case of Kali.

At the same time, the importance of the term *kali* in the *Mahābhārata*—with its full range of meanings as conflict, war, bad luck, misfortune—cannot be overemphasized. We could even say that the word *kali* defines the Epic. Kali is both the cause and the result of the conflict. As the losing throw, Kali is the cause of the problem; as misfortune, it is the result for all the Bhāratas. But *kali* is also a term that describes the conflict itself.

We could say that *kali* (in the person of Duryodhana) brought about *kali* (misfortune) for the Bhāratas by means of *kali* (the losing throw). If there is one word that can characterize the circumstances surrounding the Epic's events and their aftermath for the Bhāratas, it is *kali*. The term summarizes much of the Epic.[2]

Note that we have not yet mentioned the yugas. The evidence strongly suggests that the yuga theory came into the picture later, and that it was to a large extent precisely because the term *kali* was already closely associated with the Epic, that is was natural to identify the poem with the Kali Yuga.

How, then, did the yuga theory become associated with the *Mahābhārata*? The answer is, of course, not simple. There are several elements that come into play, and I will discuss them in an attempt to gain a better understanding of what was surely a complex process.

It is important to bear in mind the tendency of the Epic poets to enhance the story by means of hyperbolic statements that turned the narrative into an event of ever-increasing proportions. Basically, the story is that of a dispute among two branches of

the Bhāratas over the kingdom, a dispute that cannot be solved by peaceful means. When war breaks out, the results are devastating for both sides, and the poem refers to these happenings as the destruction of the Bhāratas. The conflict is seen as the end of the world for the Bhārata dynasty, the end of the age of the Bhāratas we might say, the end of the 'Bhārata Yuga.'

At some point, this terrible end of the Bhāratas started to be compared to what was then the current image of the end of the world, the yugānta, which implied a series of natural catastrophes—mainly monsoon related—brought about by the elements: scorching heat (fire), heavy rains and flooding (water), strong winds (air), and earthquakes (earth). This world destruction was mythologically associated primarily with the god Rudra/Śiva. The comparisons to yugānta are merely routine uses of a formula employed for the purpose of describing weapons or warriors as powerful, awe-inspiring and wonderful, but, importantly, there are also several instances in which the terrible events of the Epic are, themselves, compared to yugānta.

These comparisons to yugānta indicate that some form of yuga theory was already being incorporated into the Epic. They do not imply that the epic story was inserted into a particular moment of the yuga cycle. If they did, it would then have to be at the end of the Kali Yuga, not at its beginning, because the destruction at yugānta takes place at the close of the cycle of four yugas.

How the events described in the Epic finally came to be incorporated into the yuga scheme is not entirely clear. It could be that from a comparison to the end of the world, the text proceeded to an identification with it, although then the scale of the conflict would have had to be reduced because otherwise, as just mentioned, this would imply that at the end of the events of the Epic the Kṛta Yuga would begin, not the Kali Yuga. The identification would have had to be moved back one yuga, to the end of the Dvāpara, in order to accommodate the fact that the world was not destroyed, and the Kṛta Yuga did not return.

On the other hand, it is possible that the metaphor of the end of the world was used independently from the Epic's events be-

ing identified with the beginning of the Kali Yuga. If this is the case, the frequent images of yugānta nevertheless still conveyed the idea that the action took place at a time of important change, and this reinforced the possibilty of some kind of change of yuga, making it easy to later (or simultaneously) associate these happenings specifically with the end of the Dvāpara Yuga and the beginning of the terrible Kali Yuga.

In recent years, some scholars, mainly following Biardeau's lead, have studied what they view as a strong underlying apocalyptic aspect of the Epic.[3] Their work has shown that several mythological themes in the poem can carry an important apocalyptic connotation. This, I would suggest, is an extension, a reinforcement, of the comparison of the tragic events of the Epic to the end of the world—a mythological enhancement that further develops the pessimistic side of the story, and its dependence on the workings of fate.[4] But, again, even this apocalyptic aspect does not imply the existence of the yuga theory, especially if we are looking at the placing of the story at the beginning of the Kali Yuga.[5]

When the theory of the yugas found its way into the Epic story it was natural to identify the story with Kali, the last, and worst, of the yugas, because the Epic was already, to a large extent, defined by the term *kali* with all that the word implies.[6] Also, the fact that the names of the yugas were derived from those of the dice throws, and that a game of dice was instrumental in the events of the Epic, lent itself to a confusion and/or an identification (or a pun) of both meanings of the terms. In any case, the equivalence in the terminology and symbolism of the dice throws and the yugas made for an increasingly close relationship between the yugas and the Epic.

I must point out that whereas the dice game is essential to the plot, the yugas are not. If all references to the yugas were taken out of the Epic, in particular those that place the Epic story at some moment during the yuga cycle, the story line would not suffer.

It is interesting to note that, once the Epic story was identified

with the yugas, they were said to apply to Bhārata Varṣa, that is, the land of the Bhāratas. This is, at least, the view expressed in the cosmological section of Book Six, in a verse that is repeated in many Purāṇas.[7] This statement, which has puzzled some modern scholars because it implies that the yugas are only valid for India,[8] therefore contradicting the cosmogonic character of the later Purāṇic theory, can easily be understood in the light of the process of enhancement and exaggeration that the Epic went through. Just as the destruction of the Bhāratas was compared to the end of the world and was gradually turned into an event of cosmic proportions, the yugas in the Epic seem, at first, to have been considered a local phenomenon which was later increasingly mythologized and, likewise, turned into a theory of cosmic dimensions. From a quasi-historical mythologized narrative, the yugas evolved into a cosmogonical doctrine.[9] And although this transformation coincides to some extent with the changes that the theory went through from the Epic to the Purāṇas, it was largely under way in some sections of the Epic itself, as part of the Vaiṣṇava doctrine of *avatāras* or descents to earth of the supreme god Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu, as well as in the comparisons to yugānta, which are of a more Śaiva character.

We should also consider the possibility that dating the events of the *Mahābhārata* according to the yuga scheme could have first been done outside the Epic itself, in a text like the *Yuga Purāṇa*, and only later incorporated into the poem. The *Yuga Purāṇa*, as we know, describes events at yugānta, the end of the Kali Yuga, but it is interesting that it already places the events of the Epic at the end of the Dvāpara Yuga. It also says that Janamejaya, the son of Parikṣit (Arjuna's grandson), was born at the beginning of the Kali Yuga.[10] The *Yuga Purāṇa* seems to make use of the Epic's story, and of happenings during previous yugas, merely as a mythic-historical background for its decidedly historical description of foreign invasions, which are then placed towards the end of Kali. The exact textual-historical relationship between the *Yuga Purāṇa* and the Epic is difficult to ascertain, but, as we have seen, there is surely a connection between the two, especially

when it comes to the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the Epic.

The Narrative, and the Epic's Response to Social Change

I would like to suggest that the identification of the Epic with the Kali Yuga happened on two levels, or, to put it differently, that there were two processes involved. One process is internal, that is to say more closely related to the narrative, while the second process is external, derived from changing social conditions and the epic poets' response to them. This is not a clear-cut division, as the two processes are not really independent, but it can help us understand how the identification took place.

At the internal level, the epic story was easily identified with the beginning of a dark age, a Kali Yuga, because of the terrible fate that befell the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, and because of the magnified way in which this was portrayed by the epic poets, to the point of comparing it to yugānta, the end of the world. As we have seen, the term *kali* itself already defined the poem because of its association with the dice game, and because it portrays the conflict and its consequences. At the internal level, the yuga theory is not present, or if it is, it is not particularly relevant.

On the external level, in terms of the impact of social transformations on the poem, the concerns of the *brāhmaṇa* class regarding the disruption of the *varṇa* system were incorporated into the Epic, and the attempt was made to fit this into the story. The yuga theory itself, with its image of a society that gradually drifts away from the Vedas and from a social order defined by *varṇa* and *āśrama*, already embodies these preoccupations. But these worries were especially and more dramatically expressed when describing the yugānta in the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the Epic. The poet attempts to incorporate this into the story by having Yudhiṣṭhira inquire about his reign and the end of the Kali Yuga. As we have discussed in a previous chapter, there is an inherent contradiction here because the end of the Kali Yuga seems imminent, thus placing the story at the end of the dark age, instead of

at its beginning. The confusion could, perhaps, be attributed in part to the fact that the term yugānta is used frequently in the Epic, thus allowing the interpolator to see no conflict in adding this section.

However, the meaning of yugānta is different here. On the internal level, in terms of the narrative, yugānta is a mythological image of world destruction used metaphorically to describe heroes, weapons and events. On the external level, in the Mārkaṇḍeya section, yugānta denotes a decadent un-brahmanical social order brought about by foreign invaders and by a lack of respect for the traditional class divisions. In these latter descriptions, as in those of the *Yuga Purāṇa*, there is an expectation that the end of Kali, the dark age, is near. On the external level, the term *kali* refers to difficult social conditions that are adharmic, unrighteous, and un-brahmanical.

The internal level could probably be considered to be older, closer to an original epic *kṣatriya* text, whereas the external level would be part of the later strata of the, by now brahmanized, text.[11] It is clear that the Mārkaṇḍeya section is late, however I would rather not further press the issue of the relative lateness of the two levels, as there was surely an interaction between both through at least part of the Epic's development.

Codifying Time

The importance of time as a powerful agent of destruction and transformation cannot be overemphasized when we look at the history of Indian philosophies and religions. Whereas in the old Ṛg Vedic hymns to the dawn we find mainly a preoccupation with human decay and death, two hymns of the *Atharva Veda* already elevate time to the status of a superior divinity.[12] In the Brāhmaṇas time, epitomized by the year, had to be conquered or "obtained" through ritual action in order to reach immortality. By the time of the *Mahābhārata*, the doctrine of time as the supreme principle, the *kālavāda*, was obviously important and, in one form or other, continued to be so after the Epic.[13] Time was granted

varying degrees of importance by the different emerging philo-
sophical systems, but it always found a place in mythology,
where it acquired a more cosmogonic and eschatological connota-
tion as an agent of destruction and also renewal. Death, destruc-
tion, doom, night, the black color, all are related in some way to
time, and are found in the Purāṇic mythologies of the Goddess—
particularly in her expression as Kālī—and of the god Śiva, who
already possessed the fierce attributes of the Vedic god Rudra. In
classical works of poetry and in the Purāṇas, it is also common to
find passages similar to those of the *Mahābhārata* that speak of
the unconquerable power of time.[14]

In the last centuries B.C.E., but especially in the early centuries
C.E., the structure of time was increasingly codified. If the over-
powering force of time could not be avoided, it could, at least, be
understood, codified, and made predictable. The structure of time
had to be deciphered, and this had to go beyond the basic time
units such as the *nimeṣa* (an "eyewink"), the *muhūrta* (one thirti-
eth of a day), the day, the fortnight, the month, and the year.
Historical time required a concrete, measurable expression, so
larger cycles were needed. Time—and destiny—had to be inter-
preted and made predictable. Although Vedic ritualism had devel-
oped an entire branch of astronomical knowledge devoted to de-
termining the appropriate moment for the performance of rituals,
it was not a system meant to explain the conditions of society.
So, as late Vedic society observed the changes that were taking
place during this period, changes that threatened its basic tenets
and its very existence, a system of time cycles that explained
what was happening developed: these were the yugas. The yuga
theory provided a way to give shape to historical time, to objec-
tify it and, therefore, understand it better and know one's position
in it.

As for the *Mahābhārata*, the crucial role that time and destiny
play in the Epic can help us understand why the Epic was identi-
fied with the Kali Yuga. If the end of the Bhāratas was blamed
on the power of time, it was almost a natural development to
then lay the blame on what was becoming one of time's major

manifestations, the wheel of the yugas. The yugas, says a passage of the Śānti Parvan, are the lakes made by the river of time,[15] and the *Vāyu Purāṇa* portrays the yugas as the four faces of time.[16] The yugas are clearly a manifestation of time for Hanumān, during his conversation with Bhīma, when he declares that even he must conform to the yuga, for time is unconquerable.[17]

There are even sections in the Epic where the terms *kāla* (time) and yuga seem to be used as synonyms, as in some of the passages dealing with the king and the yugas.[18] So, the Epic went from placing the blame for the tragedy on time, to blaming one of time's specific manifestations: a change of yuga.[19] And the terrible fratricidal nature of the poem's story, together with the perception that society was decaying, meant that these events could only be assigned to one particular change of yuga: they had to mark the beginning of Kali, the last and worst of all the yugas.

There was another important development in the first centuries C.E., one that allowed for time to be codified on a more personal level. If the yuga system made the large-scale workings of time and destiny more understandable and manageable by explaining major social and religious transformations, there was still a need to provide a more detailed interpretation of time and destiny as they affect the individual. Rudimentary predictions were already made based on the *nakṣatra* occupied by the Moon at birth, but this didn't offer much detail. How could someone learn more about his particular destiny, his position in the relentless wheel of time?

This need was filled by the arrival of Mediterranean horoscopic astrology, which was readily adopted and adapted. Already in the earliest extant Indian astrological text, The *Yavanajātaka* of Sphujidhvaja, dating from the third century C.E.,[20] the theory of karma had been incorporated into astrology, thereby turning the individual's horoscope, his birth chart, into the expression of his actions of past lives. The results of his past actions, as well as his potential and his destiny for this life and his next incarnation, were all encoded in his horoscope. Astrology provided precise, detailed information about the person's life, his character traits, and events

that would affect him.[21] The zodiac, through which all astrological influences are expressed, was simply another manifestation of time.[22] Time was now codified, understandable, and, to some extent, manageable.

It is interesting that both the yuga system and Indian astrology contain an element that reflects the old preoccupation with time as the agent of death. In the yugas, the human life span is a prominent characteristic of each yuga, life being shorter the worse the yuga gets. In Indian astrology, to this day, the determination of the length of a person's life, the *āyurdāya*, one's allotted "portion of life," is of great importance.[23]

The pessimistic and fatalistic ethos of the *Mahābhārata* must be understood in the context of the transition from Vedism to Hinduism. It was recognized that times were changing, a major paradigmatic shift was under way, and the doctrine of time as the supreme agent of destruction played an important role in the development of new ideas. The impermanence and transitoriness of life and of all things became a major philosophical and religious concern, and this is reflected in the growing perception of the world as a place of suffering and bondage, a place one should escape or be saved from. The world exists in time, therefore the road to liberation requires going beyond time and transcending it. This urge to go beyond time is characteristic of the emerging Hinduism, as well as of Buddhism, a new movement that would become a powerful religion in its own right.

Time as a Cyclical Process

There is a further, very important development that can probably be better understood in light of the need to face the overwhelming destructive power of time. It is the growth in importance of the perception of time as a cyclical process, a perception that found expression both at the macrocosmic level, with the theory of the yugas and the kalpas, and at the microcosmic level, through the theory of reincarnation.[24] At the personal level, this means that death is not really final, and if liberation cannot be

reached in this lifetime, one can obtain it in the next one, or in the one after that. This is probably, at least to some extent, the reason why cyclical time acquired such importance during this time of transition, and later became an integral part of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

The cyclical process offers hope in the face of the terrible destructive force of time. In a sense, it provides an antidote. Yes, time destroys everything, but it also eventually restores everything. Things come and go, and then return again. Everything is subject to this cyclical movement: emotions, riches, fortune, power, and life itself through reincarnation. The entire universe undergoes this process of continuous creation and destruction.

In the *Mahābhārata*, this explanation was already resorted to when Vyāsa, after telling Arjuna that his time is up and that Kṛṣṇa's and the Pāṇḍavas' purpose for incarnating had been fulfilled, offers consolation to Arjuna by explaining that his powerful weapons will someday return to him, as everything moves in cycles:

> Time is the source of all this, Dhanaṃjaya, it is the root of the world! And time takes away at will.
>
> Here, one becomes strong, then again weak; one becomes lord, and is then ruled by others.
>
> Today, after completing their work, [your] weapons went just as they came. They will return into your hand when the time arrives.[25]

This cyclical movement is the answer to the destructive force of time for someone who lives in the social realm, in historical time. In personal time, however, for one who disengages himself from social restrictions the answer is liberation. In a sense, what in personal time is a trap, namely the circular movement in *saṃsāra*, the world, becomes the solution in historical time because things will someday change again.

It is probably significant in this context that the idea of redeath, *punarmṛtyu*, understood as a second death in heaven, made its appearance in the Brāhmaṇas before the notion of re-

birth, *punarjanma*. The term *punarjanma* would become a standard term for referring to the process of reincarnation.[26]

The Transition from Vedism to Hinduism and the Growth of the Epic

There were many changes taking place during the long period of the Epic's composition, changes in the social, religious, and economic spheres, but most of these changes were seen as negative by the brahmanic establishment, although that same establishment would later adapt to them. In the social sphere, the *varṇa* dharma was losing ground, and this was reflected politically as some rulers, including some of the foreign invaders, did not respect the established social classes.[27] In religion, Vedic sacrifices were being challenged by the growth in importance of the doctrine of *ahiṃsā*, non-injury, and by a serious questioning of the efficacy of the ritual. But the Vedic ritual was not only being questioned from the outside, as it were, by the increasingly influential 'heterodoxies' of Buddhism and Jainism. The Vedic priestly tradition was also being questioned from the inside, as shown by the way in which the Upaniṣads reinterpret elements of the Vedic sacrifice symbolically, and how some of them consider the Vedic ritual as an inferior path, in contrast to the life of a renunciant ascetic, which is then regarded as the superior way. The man who lives in a village, practices sacrifices and heads a family, does not attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths, whereas a forest-dwelling ascetic that meditates on truth does.[28]

An equivalent idea is put forth in the Nārāyaṇīya of the Epic, in the form of the opposition between *pravṛtti* dharma and *nivṛtti* dharma. *Pravṛtti* dharma, the path of ritual action, is closely linked to the Vedas and it does not lead to liberation. *Nivṛtti* dharma, on the other hand, is associated with Yoga and Sāṃkhya, and it leads to liberation.[29] This is, ultimately, another expression of the contrast between personal time and historical time, inasmuch as it pits life in the world against withdrawal from it. As we would expect from the Upaniṣads, and from a section of the

Epic dealing with liberation, renunciation is considered the superior path. However, as stated above, the Upaniṣadic passages—and those of the Nārāyaṇīya—are also important because they show that Vedic ritual was losing ground even within the brahmanic fold. The yugas would also provide an explanation for this through the concept of yuga dharma, an idea we will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

There were also significant changes in the economy, probably related to the expansion of agriculture, the growth of trade, and the increasing importance of urban centers.[30]

The *Mahābhārata* documents many of these changes which, broadly speaking, took place during the period between the Mauryan empire and the Gupta empire. They are reflected in the different layers of the text, although there were obvious attempts at giving cohesion to the many disparate elements that went into the 'final' version. When an interpolator or a later redactor adds or modifies something, he will generally attempt to give the new version cohesion and flow. If he does a good job, it will not be easy to tell that a particular passage has been modified or re-interpreted. In some cases, these modifications might be intentionally crafted to serve a particular agenda; in others, the redactor could simply be trying to clarify or illustrate what he understands to be the meaning of his received text. But, whatever the motives of the interpolator/redactor, one expects him to attempt to blend his contributions into the narrative. If it is a thorough revision, it may require adding or revising material at more than one place, wherever it is relevant throughout his text. So new teachings, instructions, stories and myths are incorporated at appropriate places along the epic narrative. These either illustrate a point, provide mythological background, present a philosophical or religious doctrine, or further an agenda.

This is done, of course, with varying degrees of success, depending on the skills of the interpolator and on how important his modifications are. The problem is compounded when there are successive interpolations and modifications, as the newer ones may or may not blend well with the previous ones or with the

text in general. The result, after centuries of this kind of trans-
formation of the text, is that there are contradictions, different
versions of certain episodes, and elaborate mythological plots that
generally put forth a particular religious or *varṇa*-related idea. All
of this is woven around the epic story, whatever its original form
may have been.

Overall, the two major transformations of the Epic were proba-
bly its change from an epic *kṣatriya* text to a brahmanized one,
and its growing Viṣṇuization. The Vaiṣṇava appropriation of the
text was effected, to a large extent, through the inclusion of the
doctrine of the *avatāras* of the supreme god Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa, a
doctrine that then became linked to the yuga theory. The connec-
tion between the yugas and the *avatāras*, however, is not well
worked out, neither in the Epic nor in the Purāṇas, as there is no
clear periodicity in the appearance of the *avatāras*. Whereas some
are born at the beginning of a kalpa or a manvantara, others ap-
pear at the beginning or the end of a certain yuga, and these
yugas may belong to different mahāyugas.[31]

There was also an important change in mythology that served
to further the supreme status of Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa. The role of In-
dra as the foremost Vedic god was diminished. There is a story
in the Śānti Parvan in which he is ridiculed and portrayed as ar-
rogant for not understanding that his role as leader of the gods is
only temporary, due to the cyclical nature of time. Time gives
and time takes away, and the fortune of Indra, like that of all
humans, comes and goes.[32] By contrast, the supreme
Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa is transcendent, he is beyond time and its cy-
cles.[33]

In the Epic, the supremacy of Viṣṇu over Indra is subtly re-
flected in the fact that Arjuna, who is Indra's son, becomes the
disciple of Kṛṣṇa, who is Viṣṇu's *avatāra*. In fact, all of the
Pāṇḍavas become his devotees, and, as they are all incarnations
of Vedic gods, this implies that the Vedic pantheon is now sub-
servient to Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa/Kṛṣṇa. Duryodhana, on the other
hand, does not seem to recognize Kṛṣṇa's divinity, and he is cast
as the incarnation of Kali (the losing throw/misfortune).[34] In the

mythological transposition of the plot, Duryodhana leads the incarnated demons against the Pāṇḍavas, who are the incarnated gods.

That the Epic was an 'open text' that received additions, is implicitly recognized by the poem itself with its well-known assertion that it includes all knowledge.[35] The Epic proclaims to be a compendium of all knowledge, and it openly quotes from other texts. This encyclopedic character of the *Mahābhārata*, we might point out in passing, is in contrast to the style of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which makes no such claims, and confines itself more to its basic story.[36]

Vaiṣṇavism and the Epics

The notion that the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* were appropriated by Vaiṣṇavism at some stage is not shared by all scholars. Although it is the prevailing opinion, there have been recent challenges to this idea. In this respect, some of Pollock's remarks regarding the divinity of Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa* deserve comment. Pollock argues that the divinity of Rāma is central to the story from the beginning, instead of being a later Vaiṣṇava interpretation. He opens his argument by saying that in the indigenous artistic and scholarly interpretation of the poem, the divine status of the hero was never questioned, and that the passages that explicitly posit Rāma's status as an incarnation of Viṣṇu were never suspected of being sectarian interpolations.[37]

But, could we reasonably expect the commentators to voice such a concern? Were these commentators not Vaiṣṇavas themselves? Traditions do not usually question their fundamental tenets. And, in a religious tradition, what can be more fundamental than the divinity of its god? If the commentators are devout Vaiṣṇavas, it is unrealistic to expect them to question the divinity of Rāma, even if there were textual bases for doing so.[38] A commentator can analyze variant readings and explore different ways of explaining certain passages, sometimes disagreeing with other commentators, but he cannot be expected to question a funda-

mental assumption of the doctrine. The question should rather be, was the divinity of Rāma acknowledged by non-Vaiṣṇavas, or rather, by non-Hindus, such as Buddhists or Jains?[39] The fact that centuries of followers accept the divinity of Rāma says nothing about the origins of the belief.

Another important part of Pollock's argument has to do with divine kingship. He shows, based to a large extent on the *Mahābhārata*, that the king is elevated to a divine status and that he is often associated with Viṣṇu, especially in his role as protector of the brahmanical social order. The king was characterized as a divinity incarnated as a man. We have already discussed in the previous chapter an aspect of this process through which the importance of the king was constantly emphasized. What is striking, however, is Pollock's conclusion based on this portrayal of the king as a combination of the human and the divine. He states that: "On these grounds alone we might be justified in concluding that the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* must have been a central feature of the poem from the beginning."[40]

How does one thing follow from the other? Pollock is apparently suggesting that because Rāma is a king—let us even say a righteous king—it follows that he is an incarnation of Viṣṇu because the king, as an institution, was considered to be a divine being associated with Viṣṇu. If we follow this reasoning, Viṣṇu's *avatāra* in the *Mahābhārata* has to be Yudhiṣṭhira, who is King Dharma himself, and not Kṛṣṇa, who never makes any claims to kingship.

Pollock rightly states that it cannot be proved on textual grounds that the composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa* "was ignorant of or indifferent to the equation of Rāma and Viṣṇu."[41] But neither can it be proven that he was aware of the equation, or that it was essential to him. There could well have been a divine element in the portrayal of Rāma from the beginning; but there is a difference between having divine qualities, which many epic heroes possess anyway, and being a manifestation of the One Supreme God, as is the case when Rāma is considered to be an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The important and difficult point is whether this is a cru-

cial component of the story from its inception, or whether it was incorporated at a later date.

There is no doubt that Vaiṣṇavism, as a doctrine that postulates Viṣṇu as the beginning and the end of everything, and as the only source of liberation, emerged at the end of the Vedic period and quickly gained strength. And there can hardly be any doubt that Vaiṣṇavism re-read much of the existing tradition from this new perspective.[42]

This process of gradual appropriation of the story by Vaiṣṇavism can still fulfill Pollock's requirement that these elements not be simple "afterthoughts or isolated allusions, but part of a design."[43] A design, yes, but a design that was superimposed on an existing story, as opposed to a design that was the blueprint for its conception.

This situation parallels the connection between the yugas and the *Mahābhārata* story. It was either the ground plan for the edifice, or a later superimposition. In both instances, the latter seems to be the case. As suggested above, re-interpretations and interpolations can be of different kinds, some simple, some elaborate, some superficial and others carefully woven into the text.

Pollock is right to warn against a facile dismissal of passages on the grounds that they are interpolations, without first giving them due consideration. And he has shown that some important elements of the story have been strung together skillfully. But, again, this is not proof that these elements—or a particular way of interpreting them—are part of the original story. We must not underestimate the abilities of some of those through whose hands the poem has passed.

Kṛṣṇa's situation in the *Mahābhārata* is similar in this respect to that of Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Actually, there are more elements in Kṛṣṇa's case that argue for his later appropriation by Vaiṣṇavism, the strongest one probably being the varying accounts of his childhood and adult life, which have led to the suggestion that Kṛṣṇa is a composite of two (or possibly three) different personages.[44]

Goldman has shown that the divine aspects of Kṛṣṇa in the

Epic have been incorporated into the story in many subtle ways that are not always acknowledged. He makes a poignant analysis of the notion of *avatāra*, pointing out that it has long been a common theme in Indian mythology that gods can be born on earth—although usually as a demotion—and that in the *Mahābhārata* this finds expression in the Pāṇḍavas' divine origins. Closely linked to this is the notion that the divinity of an incarnated god frequently remains hidden to others and, on occasion, even to the god himself.[45] This serves to demonstrate that the alternation between being recognized and remaining hidden is a recourse used widely in the Epic, and that it can be associated with the theory of *avatāras*.

As Pollock did with Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Goldman shows how Kṛṣṇa's divinity in the *Mahābhārata* can be inferred in intricate ways. However, also as in the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, although these elements lend themselves to a Vaiṣṇava reading of the texts, they cannot be adduced as proof that Kṛṣṇa was always considered to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu.

Just as an existing hero, with or without divine qualities, can later be appropriated and invested with the attributes of a Supreme God; likewise, an older tradition that recognizes *avatāras* of various gods can be transformed into the idea of the *avatāras* of the One Supreme God. As the alternating supremacy of one or other Vedic god gave way to the unquestionable eternal supremacy of only one god over all others, so, too, the notion of *avatāras* of different gods was amplified into the notion of periodic descents of the One and Only Supreme God, Viṣṇu, who appears on earth for the purpose of rescuing mankind and upholding dharma.[46]

The process by which the yugas came to be associated with the *Mahābhārata* was probably a complex and gradual one. What we know with certainty is that once it took place, the two became inextricably linked. From this point on, tradition would consider the Epic story as the marker for the beginning of the Kali Yuga. The *Mahābhārata* itself was to become a crucial and extremely

influential text, one that, in the words of van Buitenen, was early on "conceived as standing close to the beginning of national history."[47] So we can confidently say that once the yugas became part and parcel of the Epic, the fate of the yuga theory in Hinduism was sealed.

Notes

[1] "The gods move about like dice, they give us wealth and they win it [back again]," *ayā iva pari caranti devā ye asmabhyaṃ dhanadā udbhidaś ca / RV* 10.116.9. The translation of *udbhid* is problematic, I am following Keith's (1908:827) and Geldner's (1951–57, vol. 3:342) understanding of the verse. See also *RV* 10.34.

[2] Cf. Gitomer's (1992:222) characterization of the *Mahābhārata* as "the continuing repository of crisis in the public discourse of classical India," and Shulman's (1991:10) suggestion that the Epic's design is a "poetics of dilemma." It is interesting to see how the early Sanskrit literary critics who developed theories of aesthetics dealt with the obviously unappealing, tragic and fateful character of the Epic's story. In the ninth century, Ānandavardhana explained that the terrible fate of the Vṛṣṇis and the Pāṇḍavas was meant by Vyāsa, the purported author of the Epic, to produce in the audience a feeling of detachment from the world, thus leading to a state of inner peace. The predominant mood (*rasa*) of the Epic, he argued, was *śānta*, a state of inner tranquillity, and the main goal advocated by the poem was liberation, *mokṣa*. This was not made clear in the Epic, the argument went, but only suggested indirectly. Thus, the aesthetic and religious sensibilities of a later time managed to give currency to the story by construing its tragic tone and its gory descriptions as a purposefully disturbing portrayal of life in the world. Ānandavardhana's reading of the *Mahābhārata*—a reading that was, conceivably, influenced by Buddhist literary traditions like the one represented by the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghoṣa—had a significant influence on Abhinavagupta (10th century), one of the most important Sanskrit philosophers of aesthetics, who wrote a commentary of Ānandavardhana's text. To Sanskrit literary critics, the Epic would become the main example of this mood of inner tranquillity. See Masson and Patwardhan 1969:x, who also include the text and the translation (pp. 103–112) of the relevant section of Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* and of Abhinavagupta's commentary,

the *Locana.*

3 See Minkowski 1991:397-400; Koskikallio 1994:258. For Biardeau, the image of the Purāṇic *pralaya* is very important in the Epic. As stated earlier, she views the exile of the Pāṇḍavas as the Kali Yuga, which then ends with the war. This allows her to see in the war the end of a cosmic cycle which—because of the text's comparisons to yugānta— she understands as a *pralaya*, the destruction of the world at the end of a cycle of creation and destruction (1976:153). She must then put aside the fact that these are mere comparisons by explaining that the Epic is a myth that uses them on another level in a "symbolical transposition" (*transposition symbolique*) (1976:172). Her insistence on finding unity in the text, and her reluctance to accept interpolations make for convoluted explanations to reconcile the Epic's statements concerning the placement of the Epic's. action in the yuga scheme and the logic of Kṛṣṇa's appearance as *avatāra* when dharma is at the lowest point in the cycle. Scheuer (1982:332), who studied under Biardeau, is more explicit when he states that placing the war at the beginning of Kali contradicts the "deep meaning" of the *Mbh*. Biardeau herself (Biardeau & Péterfalvi 1985:42)· would then write that it was only later tradition that considered the *Mbh* as describing the passage from one age of the world to another, but she doesn't clarify how this fits in with the Epic's pronouncements in this respect or with her own earlier statements. Scheuer also talks (1982:350) of a frequent interference between the yugas and the kalpas in the Epic. Katz (1991:140, note 20), on the other hand, believes that the war is based on the Kali Yuga model, while it is Aśvatthāman's night raid on the Pāṇḍava camp that is based on the image of the *pralaya* (to Biardeau, 1976:209, the night raid is just a symbolical reprise of the war). These readings imply that the story is an enactment of cosmogonic themes, whereas I believe the opposite to be true: the dimensions of the tragedy allowed for a comparison to cosmogonic themes, and, later, to some form of mythologized identification with them.

4 Hiltebeitel, [1976] 1990:358-359, to a certain extent, comes to a similar conclusion. He considers that the *Mbh* story reflects the end of a 'heroic age,' probably as an expression of an old Indo-European story, and that this was later, and gradually, correlated with myths associated with the end of the world.

5 Some of the same scholars have realized that. many of the images of the end of the world are simply metaphors, narrative devices used for-

mulaically, but they have not gone a step further to conclude that the entire connection between yugānta—or the yugas in general—and the Epic is a later superimposition on the poem. They continued to work based on the premise that the yugas are an integral part of the *Mbh* story. See, e.g., Katz 1991:140, note 20; Koskikallio 1994:260, note 19.

[6] This includes the decidedly adharmic behavior of the epic heroes, who often resort to trickery in order to win.

[7] "In the land of the Bhāratas (*bhāratavarṣa*) there are four yugas...," 6.11.3; see Appendix A. For Purāṇic references see above, Chapter 3, note 80.

[8] Tagare, for instance, in a note to his translation of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.57.22, writes that: "It is strange that the yuga-system should be restricted to India only."

[9] That the yugas were at first intended to apply to India, and were only later included in the cosmological scheme, had been suggested many years ago by Pargiter ([1922] 1962b:175).

[10] *YP* 31–38.

[11] On the Epic's transformation from a *kṣatriya* to a *brāhmaṇa* text, see Goldman 1977:138 ff. See also van Buitenen 1973 (1980): xxi. This transformation should not be viewed purely as the displacement of one *varṇa* by another; it is part of the larger, and complex, cultural changes of the time.

[12] *AV* 19.53–54. "Time is the lord of everything, he was the father of Prajāpati," *kālo ha sarvasyeśvaro yaḥ pitāsīt prajāpateḥ // AV* 19.53.8. The Ṛg Vedic hymns to Uṣas, the dawn, could well contain the earliest Vedic speculations concerning the destructive power of time; see González-Reimann 1988:25–29.

[13] In the Epic, the doctrine of time as supreme principle was absorbed—or appropriated—by Vaiṣṇavism, as is clear from Kṛṣṇa's role as all-destroying time (6.33.32 [*BhG* 11.32], 5.66.22–23; both quoted above, in Chapter 1). Note, however, that in the episode of the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest, when he engages in furiously killing different kinds of living beings, Kṛṣṇa is described as behaving "like time," *kālavat* (1.219.6). As in the case of the uses of yugānta discussed in Chapter 2, above, this is simply a comparison, not an identification.

[14] A good example is the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, see Lalye's (1973:138–

146) chapter "The doctrine of *kāla* in the *DB*." At one point, the Goddess is called Kālarātrī (Lalye:140).

15 "All living beings created by Dhātṛ are carried away to Yama's dwelling by the powerful water of time, whose origin is like that of *brahman*, and in the midst of whose stream the lakes are the yugas...," *kālodakena mahatā ... // yugahradaughamadhyena brahmaprāyabhavena ca / dhātrā sṛṣṭāni bhūtāni kṛṣyante yamasādanam //* 12.227.13, 16.

16 "Time is the lord of the gods, he has four forms and four faces," *ayaṃ hi kālo deveśaś caturmūrtiś caturmukhaḥ / VāP* 1.32.11; the four faces—the yugas—are then described (1.32.14–19).

17 3.148.8; see Appendix B. See also 3.189.25, at the end of the Mārkaṇḍeya section on yugānta.

18 See, e.g., 12.70.6, in Appendix D. In some cases, *kāla* is part of a word used in the sense of yugānta, as in 7.166.27 where *kālaparyaya* could be translated as "the expiration/end of time."

19 This is not to say, of course, that all those passages that blame time are to be considered early. The idea was surely reaffirmed repeatedly throughout different strata of the Epic.

20 The *Yavanajātaka* of Sphujidhvaja was written in 269/270 C.E. It is a versified version of a prose translation of a Greek astrological text composed in Hellenistic Egypt. The prose translation, which has not survived, was carried out by Yavaneśvara in 149/150 C.E., during the reign of the Śaka ruler Rudradāman I of Ujjayinī (Pingree [1978], vol. 1:3). The *Yavanajātaka*, together with the lost work of an author named Satya, is the basis for most later Indian astrology (Pingree 1981b:81–82). Note that the date of Yavaneśvara's text is the same as that of Rudradāman's inscription mentioning the end of the yuga (see above, Chapter 2, note 136).

21 Another reason that probably made horoscopic astrology immediately appealing, is the fact that both astrology and Vedic ritualism are based on the theory of correspondences. All parts of the created world are interrelated, and there are connections between things sharing similar symbolic or numerical characteristics.

22 See the *Yavanajātaka* (1.14–25; 79.56, 59), Varāhamihira's *Bṛhat Jātaka* (1.5), and his *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* (2.17). The twelve constellations of the zodiac were seen as the different parts of the body of time (*kāla*) represented as a cosmic man. The first constellation, Meṣa (Aries), corresponds to his head, while the last one, Mīna (Pisces), represents his

feet. This cosmic man was part of the Mediterranean astrology that entered India, but he was easily associated with Prajāpati, the late-Vedic creator god who, in turn, had already been identified with the cosmic man, the *puruṣa*, of the *Ṛg Veda* (10.90), out of whose dismemberment the world and the social order were created.

[23] See chapters 37–42 of the *Yavanajātaka*, and chapter 7 of the *Bṛhat Jātaka*.

[24] See fig. 1, above, in the Introduction.

[25] *kālamūlam idaṃ sarvaṃ jagadbījaṃ dhanaṃjaya / kāla eva samādatte punar eva yadṛcchayā // sa eva balavān bhūtvā punar bhavati durbalaḥ / sa eveśaś ca bhūtveha parair ājñāpyate punaḥ // kṛtakṛtyāni cāstrāṇi gatāny adya yathāgatam / punar eṣyanti te hastaṃ yadā kālo bhaviṣyati //* 16.9.33–35. The same thing is later said of Kṛṣṇa's discus (17.1.38). See also 3.148.7, in the Bhīma-Hanumān dialogue, Appendix B.

[26] For *punarmṛtyu*, see the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.7; 1.5.2; 3.2.10. See also e.g. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 8.25 and *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 25.1. For a list of occurrences of the term in Vedic literature, see Witzel 1989:201–205, but especially Bodewitz 1996, who provides a good analysis. For a study of the evolution of ideas concerning death and rebirth, see Butzenberger 1996 and 1998.

[27] The predilection that many rulers showed for Buddhism undermined the importance of the social classes. After Aśoka (3d century B.C.E.), there were Indo-Greek kings like Menander (2d century B.C.E.), and Kuṣāṇa rulers like Kaniṣka (1st–2d centuries C.E.), who were attracted to Buddhism. One of the reasons that made Buddhism more appealing to foreign rulers was, probably, precisely its disregard for the alleged sacred origin of the *varṇas*.

[28] These two ways of life determine which of two routes the deceased person will follow: the *devayāna*, the path of the gods, which leads to liberation; or the *pitṛyāna*, the path of the ancestors, which entails rebirth in this world (see 12.17.14). See also *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.2.15–16; and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 5.10.1–3. For a detailed study of the two routes, which in the Upaniṣads are associated with the light and dark—ascending and descending—halves of the three astronomical cycles, the day, the lunar month and the year, see González-Reimann 1988:43–49.

[29] 12.327.36–68, 88. See also 12.169, where it is taught that it is better to live in the forest and leave the world, than to live in cities practicing

rites and conforming to the *āśramas.*

[30] See Upadhyay 1979:30; and Yadava 1978-79:60.

[31] Even Biardeau (1976:142) had to conclude that there seems to be no "rigorous correspondence" (*correspondance rigoureuse*) between the yugas and the *avatāras.* For a longer discussion, see González-Reimann 1988:145-47.

[32] The story appears in 12.220, which is one of the sections devoted to time as the supreme principle. The Purāṇic version, in which Viṣṇu appears as the supreme god, was made popular in the West by Zimmer's rendition of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* account. See Zimmer [1946] 1963:3-11; the passage is given as 4.47.50-161.

[33] For other examples of how Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa gradually supersedes Indra, see Bhattacharji 1970:295-297, 306. The most well known expression of this in Vaiṣṇava mythology is surely the story of Kṛṣṇa telling the cowherds of Vraja (Vṛndāvana) not to proceed with a sacrifice to Indra, which they were about to perform in order to bring about rain. Kṛṣṇa deliberately angers Indra by declaring that, as cowherds, the inhabitants of Vraja should not worship the storm god, but should worship the hills instead. The cowherds then worship the hill Govardhana, which, it turns out, is a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa. A furious Indra then rises to the bait and unleashes a terrible storm on the cowherds, prompting Kṛṣṇa to lift Govardhana off the ground and use it as an umbrella to protect them from the rain. Indra, realizing that Kṛṣṇa is superior, desists from his efforts and pays him homage. The story is told in the *Harivaṃśa* (59-62), as well as in the *Viṣṇu* (5.10-12) and the *Bhāgavata* (10.24-25, 27) Purāṇas.

[34] See 6.62.31. On Duryodhana's anti-Viṣṇu character, see von Simson (1984:220), who follows Holtzmann; see also Gitomer 1992.

[35] "Whatever is found here on the subject of dharma, prosperity (*artha*), pleasure (*kāma*), and liberation (*mokṣa*), bull of the Bhāratas, can be found elsewhere; if it is not here, it is nowhere," *dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha / yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit* // 1.56.33, 18.5.38. In other words, whatever knowledge there is on these subjects is included here, if it is not here, it does not exist. I might mention that Hiltebeitel (1993:19, note 121) suggests a different, rather far-fetched reading of this verse. To him, it "looks less like an encyclopedic slogan than a serious *āstika* (i.e. 'Hindu') statement about the nature of what 'is' and 'is not,' and an affirmation that the 'Fifth

Veda's' deepest universal teachings are about 'what is.'" However, he does not provide his translation of the verse.

[36] See Pollock 1986:41. The first and last books of the *Rām*, however, do display a taste of the encyclopedic style of the *Mbh*, mainly through the addition of mythological material (Goldman 1984:77).

[37] Pollock 1991:15. Pollock is here being true to his stated purpose of approaching the text according to the traditional mode of reception; see above, Introduction, note 24.

[38] This would be akin to expecting a medieval Christian European exegete to question the divinity of Jesus on the grounds that there are contradictions in the Bible.

[39] The answer, as one would expect, is no. For Jainism, Rāma was merely a heroic figure. As for Kṛṣṇa, he did not even qualify for hero status due to his dubious behavior; the hero, instead, was his elder brother Balarāma, while Kṛṣṇa was simply his companion, his *nārāyaṇa* in Jaina terminology. See Jaini [1979] 1990: 304–306, and 1993 passim; as well as Bai and Zydenbos 1991: 254, 259, 264. Most Buddhist versions of Rāma's story, on the other hand, identify Rāma and his companions as previous incarnations of the Buddha and his family. In the *Dasaratha Jātaka*, the oldest Buddhist version of the story, "this is the only source for the sacrality of the major figures in the story," according to Reynolds (1991:54). In Buddhist tradition, the first person to narrate the story was the Buddha himself and not Vālmīki, the purported author of the Sanskrit version (Reynolds 1991:53). We can see a parallel situation in the way Christianity unquestioningly accepts the divinity of Jesus, whereas for Judaism and Islam he does not possess such a status. According to Islam, Jesus was merely another prophet.

[40] Pollock 1991:51–52.

[41] Pollock 1991:52.

[42] Just as the emerging Christianity re-read the Hebrew Bible from its own perspective. Or, for that matter, as did the Jewish sect responsible for the writing of the Dead Sea Scrolls: "[in the Scrolls] material was added to the biblical texts quoted. The additions were intended to give a particular 'spin' to the biblical portions being interpreted" (Wise, Abegg & Cook 1996:12).

[43] Pollock 1991:34.

[44] For a summary of this discussion see Hawley 1987.

45 Goldman 1995:83 ff. Pollock (1984: *passim*) also uses the motif of the hidden god to argue in favor of Rāma's role as *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (as the Supreme God) as being essential to the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, in this case, the idea is that Rāma himself must necessarily be unaware of his own divinity until after he has killed Rāvaṇa for, otherwise, Rāvaṇa's boon that protected him from being killed by a god would have saved him from Rāma. This is an ingenious argument, but if Rāma is a god he is so whether he is aware of it or not, and there are no provisions in the boon stating that the god's degree of awareness of his divine condition should play any role in the story. Pollock follows the 18th century commentator Tryambaka Makhin on this, and it is surprising that he should state in his concluding remarks that "as an interpolation it [the motif of Rāma as a hidden god in the *Rāmāyaṇa*] would seem to be a singularly odd one..." (ibid.: 243), when it can easily be explained as a procedure for appropriating the text. Hiltebeitel (1999:156) considers this publication of Pollock's as "a turning-point in making this argument persuasive," that is, the argument that the divinity or Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (and that of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*) is "fully structured into the plans of the original compositions."

46 The theory of *avatāras* was, of course, also incorporated into Śaivism.

47 Van Buitenen 1973:6.

Chapter 6

The Yugas in the Purāṇas and the Dharma Śāstras

Which Dharma?

In the Epic there are several discussions concerning which dharma should be considered superior to all others. The main contenders for such recognition are usually knowledge (*jñāna* or *vidyā*), austerity (*tapas*), giving (*dāna* or *pradāna*), sacrifice (*yajña*), and non-injury (*ahiṃsā* or *ānṛśaṃsya*), but there are also others as we shall see. This debate about which dharma is supreme is often separate from the question of the appropriate dharma for each *varṇa*, although, on occasion, the discussion seems to revolve around which activity is better for *brāhmaṇas*.

The debate was prevalent enough to warrant the following statement from an epic poet:

'This one is the best, this one is the best,' says a man who is convinced. A person always praises the dharma he follows.[1]

In other words, every person defends his chosen way of conduct as the one best-suited for attaining merit or liberation. Already in Book Three we find an argument in favor of non-injury (*ānṛśaṃsya*) as the superior dharma.[2] Non-injury, under the term *ahiṃsā*, is often considered as the highest dharma in Book Twelve,[3] but also elsewhere, as in Book Fourteen, where it shares some of the honors with knowledge (*jñāna*)[4] after a discussion that includes meditation, sacrifice, giving, austerity, Vedic study,

and more.[5] In the Mokṣadharma section of Book Twelve, however, we also find that controlling the senses and the mind is acknowledged as the highest dharma.[6]

In another dialogue, this time in Book Thirteen, the conclusion is that *dāna*, giving, is equal to, or even better than other dharmas, such as the study of the Vedas, the control of the senses or total renunciation (*sarvatyāga*).[7] And there is also the well-known pronouncement made by Śakuntalā when King Duḥṣanta refuses to recognize their child, Bharata (the ancestor of all the Bhāratas), as his own. She states that speaking the truth is comparable to mastering all the Vedas, and to bathing in every sacred place (*tīrtha*).[8] She says:

> There is no dharma higher that truth; there is nothing beyond truth. Nothing here [in this world] is worse than lying.[9]

The need to assign a higher status to a certain dharma over others is not exclusive to the Epic. It was surely part of the general rearrangement of religious and social priorities that took place towards the end of the Vedic period. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* three kinds of people are considered to be followers of dharma: 1) those who celebrate sacrifices, recite the Vedas, and offer gifts (*dāna*); 2) those who are dedicated to practicing austerity; and 3) those who become celibate and live with their teacher. These three will receive rewards according to their merit, but above them is the person who is steadfast in *brahman*.[10]

In the *Mahābhārata* there is yet another solution to the problem: the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* approach. Just before the recitation of the 1,000 names of Viṣṇu, Bhīṣma explains that the highest dharma is to constantly praise and worship Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu with devotion (*bhakti*):

> I consider this to be by far the greatest of all dharmas: to always praise and worship with hymns the lotus-eyed one (Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu) with devotion.[11]

The ultimate answer to the question of which dharma is best, is Kṛṣṇa's well-known, sweeping statement at the end of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

> Abandon all dharmas and come only to me for protection. I will
> free you from all evil, don't grieve.[12]

There is another way of solving the conflict, however, and it
brings us back to the yuga theory. Instead of claiming that one
particular dharma is absolutely superior to others, the idea arose
that different dharmas were, in turn, foremost, depending on the
yuga. There is a passage in the *Mahābhārata* that clearly and ex-
plicitly puts forth this idea:

> Dharmas are different in the Kṛta Yuga, in the Tretā and in the
> Dvāpara; they are different in the Kali Yuga, according to the
> capabilities [of people in each yuga].

> Austerity is the best in the Kṛta Yuga, and knowledge in Tretā.
> They say it is sacrifice in Dvāpara, and giving (*dāna*) in the Kali
> Yuga.[13]

These two verses, together with the entire section they are in, also
appear, with slight variations, in the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*.[14] It is
difficult to know whether one text borrowed from the other, or if
they both drew from a third source, but what is important for our
purposes is that assigning different dharmas to the yugas does not
play a noteworthy role in the Epic. It was to gain importance
later.

Let us take a closer look at the distribution of dharmas in this
passage. It is not surprising that sacrifice should be assigned to a
yuga that was ending, this is an elegant way of putting the insti-
tution of ritual sacrifice in the past without diminishing its im-
portance. What is striking is the chosen dharma for the Kali
Yuga. Why *dāna*? The probable answer is provided by the Epic
itself. Gift giving is highly praised in the *Mahābhārata*, especially
in Books Twelve and Thirteen where, more often than not, *brāh-
maṇas* are the main recipients.[15] Giving gifts to *brāhmaṇas* is one
of the most desirable actions according to the Epic, one that
brings the highest rewards.[16] In fact, the terms *dāna* and *dakṣiṇa*
(payment to *brāhmaṇas* for their services) seem, at times, to be-
come almost interchangeable.

With the exception of the passages already noted, *dāna* is not

associated with the Kali Yuga in the Epic, it is simply prescribed as an important activity that confers great merit. There is a passage that states that in "this Kali Yuga" *dāna* brings happiness, and one should give cows and land to *brāhmaṇas*, as well as "abundant *dakṣiṇa*" (*bahudakṣiṇa*). But this chapter was, significantly, not included in the main body of the Critical Edition, and was placed in an appendix instead. We have already discussed the verse that alludes to "this Kali Yuga."[17]

The meaning of *dāna* is not restricted to gifts for *brāhmaṇas*, however. Gifts to the ancestors, the *pitṛs*, are also mentioned, as are gifts to those in need. This implies that *dāna* can, basically, be of two kinds: giving specifically to *brāhmaṇas*; and giving in a more general sense, giving as an act of compassion or charity.

The first meaning was, at least to a certain extent, a vehicle for promoting the importance of the priestly class, whereas the second one was probably a response to a widely prevalent ethos in the religious developments of the last centuries B.C.E. and the first centuries C.E., one that went beyond sectarian boundaries: an ethos of compassion and respect for all forms of life, an ethos that is also closely connected to the idea of *ahiṃsā*, non-injury.

It is no surprise then, that the importance of *ahiṃsā* should be shared by all three emerging religions, Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, nor that *dāna*, in the broader sense of charity, generosity, or alms giving, should also be important to Buddhism and Jainism.[18] In fact, there is even a Buddhist version of yuga dharma in the *Mātṛkā* of the Haimavata (or Mūlasarvāstivāda) sect, a branch of the Sthaviravāda school that dates back to the last centuries B.C.E. and the early centuries C.E. The text teaches that Buddhist dharma would decline throughout a five hundred year period after the time of the Buddha, and then disappear. Each century would be ruled by a different type, or aspect, of dharma. The descending order of these five is liberation, concentration, right conduct, erudition, and *dāna*.[19]

It is interesting that *ahiṃsā* should not have been chosen as the dharma of the Kali Yuga instead of *dāna*. One can only speculate that the interests of the *brāhmaṇa* class had something to do with

this.[20] But the idea that different dharmas are superior depending on the yuga—the concept of yuga dharma—would also serve other purposes in post-epic Hinduism, as we shall shortly see.

'This' Kali Yuga

The Hindu as we know and have known him
is a creature of the Kaliyuga

—Pocock [1967] 1980:311

It was largely because of the *Mahābhārata* that the theory of the four yugas and the conviction that the world is experiencing the Kali Yuga became firmly established. The yuga theory gained such importance that it probably should be included in any attempt at defining post-epic Hinduism. The *Mahābhārata* is largely responsible for raising the yuga theory to a prominent position in Hinduism. It was precisely the Epic's adoption of the system— and the placing of epic events in the yuga scheme—that turned the yugas into a primary time system. This paved the way for all later explanations of the conditions of dharma, society, and human conduct to be formulated with reference to the Kali Yuga.

During, and especially after the Gupta period, it became an unquestionable fact that 'this' was the Kali Yuga. The Kali Yuga was now to blame for any and all terrible or difficult conditions in the world. It became, essentially, a metaphor for the present, for the current times.[21] All mythological and religious references to the past and the present, as well as the future, were now framed in the context of the yugas. Texts composed after the events described in the Epic had taken place were automatically considered to have been written in the Kali Yuga. The words "in this Kali Yuga..." were now a stock phrase often found when moral decay and the negative conditions of society were discussed.

Even medical treatises blamed the existence of sickness on the Kali Yuga. In a chapter devoted to the spread of epidemics, the *Caraka Saṃhitā* (3d–5th centuries), the earliest extant text on the medical system of *āyurveda*, explains the origins of disease as the

consequence of the gradually declining energy and well-being of people brought about by the passage of the yugas. As rains, crops, and the quality of diet and life-style diminish, so does the body's resistance to disease, and this coincides with the shorter life-spans caused by the advance of the yugas.[22] At the conclusion of this cosmic etiology of disease the treatise quotes the following:

> In each yuga a fourth of dharma is sequentially removed, as are the qualities of living beings. In this way, the world is [gradually] destroyed.
>
> When one hundred years have passed—this being the acknowledged standard for the life-span of embodied beings—one's years run out.[23]

This is the stated cause of the first appearance of disorders.[24]

It was, in all likelihood, the astronomers of the Gupta period who gave the yuga system a chronological framework by establishing that the present Kali Yuga had started in the year 3102 B.C.E., a date that was arrived at by calculating when the last conjunction of all the planets at the beginning of the constellation of Aries had taken place. This was to become generally accepted as the starting date of the Kali Yuga.[25]

In practical terms, there were now really only two yugas: this yuga and the other yuga. This yuga is the present Kali Yuga, which is bad; and the other yuga is the past (and future) yuga, which is good (Kṛta, Tretā and Dvāpara combined, but symbolized mainly by Kṛta). The Kali Yuga as an explanation for everything that seems wrong became the focal point of the system.[26]

Belief in the yuga theory and the pervasive negative influence of the Kali Yuga became so much a matter of course in the following centuries—and up to present times—that it has been equally accepted by the *brāhmaṇas* and by those who have opposed the brahmanical establishment and criticized epic and Purāṇic ideas.[27] It also extended beyond Hinduism, and was early on an important element of Indian Buddhism. Jainism, likewise, agreed that humanity was near the lowest point in its cyclical

history, although the Jain theory of cosmic cycles does not include the yugas. All three religions agreed on the cosmically-determined, negative and decadent conditions of society.

In the centuries after the Guptas, the yugas, and the Kali Yuga in particular, were somewhat redefined. Although concerns about the breakdown of the *varṇa* system continued to be voiced, and the theme of the menacing foreign invaders was often brought up, they no longer seemed to be the dominant preoccupation.[28] They were, to a certain extent, superseded—or at least supplemented— by a perception of the yugas that focused more on morality and righteousness, and on the presence of good or bad qualities.[29] It is significant that the Kṛta Yuga was gradually, but surely, renamed the Satya Yuga, the yuga of truth.[30] At the same time, the link between the yugas and the dice game receded into the background.

As for heretics, they were, for the most part, no longer seen as a malady of yugānta as in the case of the Epic, but as one of the evils of life within the Kali Yuga. Complaints were usually raised against sects that did not adhere to the dharma of *varṇa* and *āśrama*, as in the case of the Kāṣāyins, the Nirgranthas and the Kāpālikas.[31]

Special attention must be paid, in this regard, to the way Buddhism was portrayed in the Purāṇas and other texts. Buddhism was granted a place in the cosmogonic framework by making Buddha one of Viṣṇu's *avatāras*. But it must be clear that the inclusion of the Buddha in the list of *avatāras* did not imply an acceptance of his teachings. How could it, when Buddhism rejected both the authority of the Vedas and the existence of the *ātman*, the soul? What his presence in the list reflects is surely a recognition of the social importance of Buddhism during a certain period, and of Buddhist doctrine as something to reckon with.

The yuga theory was used for explaining the appearance of Buddhism as well as for discarding it. According to most Purāṇas, Viṣṇu was born as the Buddha in the Kali Yuga in order to deceive the demons who were celebrating Vedic sacrifices, and so lead them away from Vedic practices. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (5th

century) explains that the gods asked Viṣṇu to protect them from the incarnated demons who were not following the Vedas. Viṣṇu complied by emitting from his body a man called Māyāmoha ("deceitful confusion"), and sending him to earth to deceive the demons. It is clear that the text is referring to Buddhists and, possibly, also Jains [32] This idea even found its way into the interpolated sections of a few manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata*, although here instead of the demons it is mankind that will be deluded. Note that the beginning of Kali is now associated with the appearance of the Buddha:

> When the Kali Yuga begins, I [Viṣṇu] will speak at the court of righteous kings in the language of Magadha after sitting under the *rājataru* tree. As Buddha, the son of Śuddhodana, wearing a reddish garment, [with the head] shaved and with white teeth, I will confuse mankind.[33] When I become the Buddha the *śūdras* will enjoy [the benefits of] the ceremonies for the ancestors; all men will shave [their heads], and they will dress in red. The *brāhmaṇas* will not study [the Vedas], and they will not keep the [ritual] fire...

> When the Kali Yuga ends [I will be born as] Kalkin, a yellowish-brown *brāhmaṇa*, son of Viṣṇuyaśas—a Yājñavalkya priest—and with the help of all my *brāhmaṇa* followers I will completely destroy the foreigners and the heretics.[34]

The *Śiva Purāṇa* (8th–14th centuries) also states clearly that the teacher of delusion spreads his teachings at the beginning of the Kali Yuga. Viṣṇu (instructed by Śiva) tells him:

> Then, mighty one, go into the desert and wait there practicing your dharma, my child, until Kali arrives.

> When the yuga begins, proclaim your dharma; it will live on thanks to you, your disciples and their disciples.

> Under my command your dharma will surely spread. If you follow my instructions intently you will attain your eternal goal, which is mine.[35]

We must point out that Buddhism countered by inverting the argument. In the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* (6th century?), a text about Avalo-

kiteśvara, the most popular "great being" (*mahāsattva*) of Ma-
hāyāna Buddhism, Maheśvara (Śiva) and other Purāṇic gods are
said to be born from the great Avalokiteśvara.[36] After their birth,
the great being says the following to Maheśvara:

> When the Kali Yuga arrives, you will become Maheśvara (Śiva).
> Born as the foremost of the gods (*ādideva*) in the world of suf-
> fering beings [i.e. Earth], you will be called the creator and the
> maker. All beings who engage in conversation with such low
> people [who follow you] will be deprived of the path to enlight-
> enment.[37]

But the Buddha was sometimes also portrayed in a positive light,
mainly in later texts such as the *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva (12th
century), who refers to him as the *avatāra* with a compassionate
heart (*sadayahṛdaya*) who condemned the killing of animals in
Vedic sacrifices.[38] It is significant that, by this time, Buddhism
had lost strength in the subcontinent and, therefore, no longer
posed a serious threat to orthodox Hinduism.

Yuga Dharma

We have seen how the conflict regarding which dharma is supe-
rior was resolved, at least partially, by the idea of yuga dharma.
According to this view, different dharmas are not necessarily
better or worse, they are either adequate for the times or they are
obsolete. Just as there is an appropriate dharma for each social
class (the *varṇa* dharma) and for each stage of life (the *āśrama*
dharma), it required no great effort to accept the existence of a
dharma appropriate for the historical moment, the current yuga.[39]
We have seen the earliest instance of such an explanation in the
Epic verses which also appear in the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*, but
later Dharma Śāstras were to continue to use the yuga theory to
account for changes in customs and practices.

The same verses reappear in the Smṛti of Parāśara (5th cen-
tury?),[40] but this time they are followed by an additional verse
stating that the dharmas of Manu are for the Kṛta Yuga, those of
Gautama for the Tretā, those of Śaṅkha-Likhita for the Dvāpara,

while the appropriate dharmas for the Kali Yuga are those laid down by Parāśara himself.[41] So it now turns out that even Manu's laws—as well as those of Gautama and Śaṅkha-Likhita—are outdated and have to be brought up to date by Parāśara. But the process did not stop here. In time, many social practices that were current in the Vedic period were not only no longer prescribed but were now prohibited.[42] By the tenth or the eleventh century long lists started being put together laying down the practices that were no longer acceptable, the *kalivarjyas*, or prohibitions of the Kali Yuga.[43]

The commentators of the Dharma Śāstras constantly used the yuga theory to explain why practices accepted by the texts were now forbidden. They were troubled, however, by the suggestion that dharma could vary and not be immutable. Medhātithi, the first commentator of Manu's text, maintained that dharma itself did not change as the yugas advanced. One should rather understand that due to the decreasing capacity of men in each yuga they are less able to follow it correctly. According to him, dharma, in these passages, means the different ways of acquiring merit that are more easily attainable according to the yuga.[44] Whether Medhātithi's interpretation of Manu's words is correct or not, the implication is still that things are done differently in each yuga, and that the way to attain, or obtain, merit will vary accordingly.

Putting the worries of Dharma Śāstra commentators aside, the important thing is that once it was established that what is considered to be rightful conduct (or what is accepted as the adequate way to obtain merit) depends on the yuga, the door was open for sectarian appropriations of the theory. If what one wishes to obtain is spiritual liberation, then the means to attain it must also conform to the yuga. But, who decides what the dharma for each yuga should be?

It will now become clear that an effective means of legitimizing a certain religious system, a path, is to say that it is the best one according to the yuga. By the same token, a good way of diminishing the importance of other systems is to say they belong

to other, former yugas. As discussions concerning which dharma is better turned into disagreements about which dharma is best for the Kali Yuga in particular, the conflict moved from a largely non-sectarian affair to a sectarian debate.

In fact, the *Mahābhārata* had already taken the first steps in this direction by stating that worshipping Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu was the supreme dharma. The Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas now updated this belief by framing it within the yuga theory. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (5th century), we find a verse equivalent to the one from *Manu* and the *Mahābhārata*:

> The same thing one obtains in the Kṛta by meditating, in the Tretā by performing sacrifices, and in the Dvāpara by worshipping, one obtains in the Kali by praising Keśava (Viṣṇu).[45]

We must point out the lack of agreement between this list and the one in *Manu* and in the Epic. In this case meditation, instead of austerity, is assigned to the first yuga; sacrifice is moved from the Dvāpara to the Tretā; and worship corresponds to the Dvāpara. But, what is more significant is that what is prescribed for the Kali Yuga is no longer simply a certain activity. It is now an activity directly related to a specific god: the praise of Viṣṇu. This same verse was later reworked and taken one step further by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10th century), where it reads:

> The same thing [one obtains] in the Kṛta by meditating on Viṣṇu, in the Tretā by performing sacrifices, and in the Dvāpara by worshipping; [one obtains] in the Kali by the recitation of [the name of] Hari (Viṣṇu).[46]

In this case Viṣṇu is not only the god to be worshipped in the Kali Yuga, we now hear that meditation, which was the paramount activity of the Kṛta Yuga, is really meditation on Viṣṇu. And for the *Bhāgavata* it had to be so, as it clearly states elsewhere that Hari (Viṣṇu) is worshipped under different names and forms that conform to each yuga.[47] This supreme presence of Viṣṇu in every yuga—and ultimately in every kalpa and manvantara—attains its most complete expression in the fully developed theory of his *avatāras*, or descents to earth. An often-quoted

statement in this respect is Kṛṣṇa's eloquent pronouncement in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

> Whenever there is a decrease of dharma, Bhārata, and an increase of adharma, I create myself.

> I am born from yuga to yuga for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to [re]establish dharma.[48]

However, it is not clear how the expression "from yuga to yuga," *yuge yuge*, should be understood here, as the word yuga could mean either one of the four yugas, all four together, or an age in a metaphorical, non-technical sense. It probably simply means 'periodically,' 'whenever needed;'[49] but even if the yuga theory is intended, we do not know at what stage of development the theory was. There is nothing in the context that can help clarify the intended meaning; the *Gītā* never mentions the four yugas, so we cannot assume that it has knowledge of the classical system.[50]

The repetition of Viṣṇu's name as the best method for attaining liberation received further impetus with the teachings of Caitanya (16th century), who taught that the only viable way to cultivate *bhakti* in the Kali Yuga is through the name of Hari/Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu.[51]

It is interesting that both the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata* Purāṇas explain that reciting the name of Viṣṇu does not require great exertion. In Kali, says the *Viṣṇu*, dharma is accomplished by very little effort. This is the great virtue of the otherwise terrible Kali Yuga.[52] The *Bhāgavata*, again, takes this idea even further and says that discerning persons will appreciate the Kali Yuga because in it one will reach liberation merely by praising Hari. People from other yugas wish to be born in Kali, as in this yuga they will be entirely devoted to Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu).[53] By this clever explanation, the pattern of the yugas is somehow reversed, and the terrible Kali Yuga turns out to be the most desirable yuga of all.

Tulsidas (16th century) repeats the same idea in his popular and influential version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, only that, in his case, it is the name of Rāma that should be sung.[54] Similarly, in one of the hagiographic tales about Guru Nānak (15th century), the

founder of Sikhism, he is said to have encountered a personifica-
tion of the Kali Yuga. Kali quickly recognized Nānak's superior-
ity, and the Guru declared that in Kali, liberation could be
reached by meditating for a few minutes on the divine name, as
opposed to the lengthy austerities required in previous times.[55]
Ravidās (15th–16th centuries), another Sant poet, expresses the
same idea.[56] However, for the medieval *nirguṇī* Sants, the divine
name does not stand for a personal god, but usually represents an
impersonal, attribute-free (*nirguṇa*) principle instead.[57] It is clear
that turning the Kali Yuga into a desirable age makes the pros-
pect of living at the lowest point in human history more bear-
able.[58]

The conditions of the Kali Yuga were also used for justifying
attacks on the famous Śaiva philosopher Śaṅkara (8th century).
According to the Vaiṣṇava *Padma Purāṇa* (9th–10th centuries), the
god Śiva declared that the doctrine of illusion (*māyā*) was false,
and was really Buddhism in disguise. Śiva was instructed by
Viṣṇu to be born in the Kali Yuga as the *brāhmaṇa* Śaṅkarācārya,
and teach it.
Śiva says to Pārvatī:

> In order to destroy the demons, Viṣṇu took on the form of the
> Buddha and taught the false Buddhist doctrine, [as well as the
> doctrines of those who are] naked or clad in dark garments.

> The *māyāvāda* doctrine is [also] false, it is crypto-Buddhism. I
> took on the form of a *brāhmaṇa* in Kali, and I proclaimed it, O
> Goddess![59]

The irony is that, according to Śaṅkara's hagiographers, he was
an incarnation of Śiva whose purpose it was to defeat heretics
such as Buddhists and Kāpālikas, in order to reestablish the Vedic
dharma.[60] The followers of the Vaiṣṇava philosopher Madhva
(13th century) insisted that Śaṅkara taught Buddhism in disguise
in the Kali Yuga, but then went a step further by stating that the
god Vāyu incarnated as Madhva to refute Śaṅkara's teachings.[61]
In the sixteenth century, Caitanya repeated the *Padma Purāṇa*'s
criticism of Śaṅkara, and Bhaktivedanta Swami (20th century),

while commenting on Caitanya's stance, acknowledges that Śankara had to defeat the Buddhists, but adds that his teachings where only meant as a temporary emergency measure.[62]

We have discussed Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, but what do other Purāṇas have to say on this matter? Each Purāṇa adapts the yuga theory to suit its own purposes, so in the Śaiva *Kūrma Purāṇa* (6th-9th centuries), we find the following interesting explanation. The text says that at the beginning of the Kali Yuga, Kṛṣṇa, having fulfilled his mission, explained to some sages that he would now return to his eternal abode. Here on Earth, he continued, those who are devoted to Nārāyaṇa can attain the highest state, but—and this is the important part—they cannot attain it if they are hostile to Śiva.[63] From here, the Purāṇa goes on to say that although Viṣṇu was the presiding god during the Dvāpara Yuga, in Kali the supreme deity is Maheśvara Rudra (the "Great Lord" Śiva), who is also worshipped in all other yugas.[64] It later emphasizes the point again:

> In Kali, the great god Rudra is the supreme lord of the worlds;
> there should be no [other] deity for men or gods.[65]

The text refers to the Kali Yuga as the yuga of Śiva (Maheśvara Yuga), and says that *brāhmaṇas* especially should seek refuge in him during this age.[66] The *Kūrma Purāṇa* also gives a list of yuga dharmas, but differs from the two versions we have previously discussed. It places meditation in Kṛta, knowledge in Tretā, sacrifice in Dvāpara, and giving in Kali.[67]

We can now turn, for a third opinion, to the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (11th century), a text devoted to the worship of the Goddess. While addressing the Devī, the gods complain with these words about the writers of other Purāṇas:

> Alas! Now that the very corrupt age of Kali has begun men do not worship you! Indeed, they have been misled by deceivers who are learned in the Purāṇas [or: clever in how they portray past events], and who have made them serve Hari (Viṣṇu) and Śankara (Śiva), whom you created.[68]

The text gives great importance to the yuga dharma, and asserts

that the only way to be saved in Kali is to meditate on the feet of the Goddess.[69] It also takes the importance of the Devī beyond the present yuga, for in Kṛta—now called Satya—all the social classes were devoted to her worship.[70] The *Purāṇa* also says that the *brāhmaṇas* of the Kali Yuga were formerly demons, *rākṣasas*.[71] This attack on the *brāhmaṇas* would later be quoted by a nineteenth century hagiographer of the medieval Sant Kabīr (15th–16th centuries), while describing the hostility they displayed against the poet.[72] Kabīr himself had linked the presence of unworthy *brāhmaṇas* to the Kali Yuga by calling it "the age of phony Brahmins."[73]

In modern day Varanasi (Banaras) there is a widespread popular belief that Śiva has turned over the governance of the city to the Goddess during the Kali Yuga; and it is sometimes said that Viṣṇu and Śiva are asleep during this age, and cannot hear the supplications of their followers.[74] The gods are thought to be so distant that some believe the sacred Ganges River is the only way to liberation in Kali. The authority for this pronouncement is the *Skanda Purāṇa* (12th century),[75] where we find yet another variant of our list of yuga dharmas:

> In Kṛta, meditation brings about liberation; in Tretā, austerities. In Dvāpara, both (meditation and austerities), [as well as] sacrifices; in Kali only Gaṅgā.[76]

Note that the different dharmas are not merely said to be the best in each yuga, they are expressly said to be conducive to liberation. It is also noteworthy that it is a certain location, as opposed to the worship of a particular god, that one should resort to in the Kali Yuga, although we can probably assume that both the Ganges River and the city of Varanasi must be understood as closely linked to the god Śiva.[77]

It is not only in Varanasi, however, that the Goddess currently enjoys the status of favorite divinity (*iṣṭādevatā*) of the age. Erndl reports that she was repeatedly told by devotees of the Goddess throughout Northwest India that her worship is especially appropriate nowadays because we are in the Kali Yuga, in which the Goddess reigns supreme.[78]

Another tradition that adopted the Kali Yuga explanation in order to assert its importance is the cult of the monkey god Hanumān, a cult that grew noticeably from the eleventh century onwards, but especially after the fifteenth century, concurrently with the increase in the popularity of Rāma. By the time of Tulsidas (16th century), Hanumān was already considered to be a "special patron of devotees" in the Kali Yuga. As in the case of the Goddess, he is today regarded by many as their favorite deity, their *iṣṭādevatā*, for the Kali Yuga.[79]

For a final example of the sectarian appropriation of the concept of yuga dharma we can turn to late Tantric literature, where there is a further variation on the theme with the appearance of the related concept of yuga *śāstra*: the texts that are best suited for each yuga. Although the *Padma Purāṇa* (9th–10th centuries) had already moved in this direction by announcing that the only text that can help attain liberation in the Kali Yuga is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*,[80] it is the Tantras that bring this concept to its fullest expression. The *Kulārṇava Tantra* (11th–15th centuries) declares that:

> In Kṛta, proper behavior (*ācāra*) is defined by Śruti; in Tretā, it originates in Smṛti. In Dvāpara, it is defined by the Purāṇas; in Kali, only by the Āgamas (Tantras).[81]

In the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (18th century?), Śiva explains to his wife Pārvatī that he is the Supreme Lord, and he had already foretold in the Vedas, the Smṛtis, and the Purāṇas that the only way to salvation in the Kali Yuga would be the doctrine of the Āgamas. In this yuga, liberation is not possible for those following any other path.[82] Thus, in one swift move, this Tantra assigns all other texts to former yugas, and portrays them as being useless for our times. As other texts had done before it, the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* also confers a special status on the Kali Yuga for, in it, a resolute follower of Tantrism will obtain results merely by his intentions. While in other yugas effort could result in either merit or demerit, in this yuga it produces only merit.[83] The concept of yuga *śāstra* is of great importance to late Tantric doctrine, to the extent that Tantrism claims to hold sway over all

traditional communities of worshippers in the Kali Yuga.[84]

Beyond the sectarian nature of these ideas about yuga dharma, it seems clear that in providing the vast cosmic scheme in which a particular tradition is embedded, they also offer the security of knowing why things are as they are. I would suggest that by the tenth century, and probably much earlier, the theory had gained such prominence that it became important, if not indispensable, to position one's religious system, one's path, within the theory's cosmic-historical framework in order to be an acceptable part of what had now become 'tradition.'

The Modern Importance of the Yugas

The yuga theory played a significant part in the way Europeans perceived India. In the eighteenth century, the view that the present Kali Yuga is a time of moral and social decay as opposed to the glorious past ages strongly influenced British scholars' perception of Indian history. This, in turn, had an influence on British administrators in India, as it provided them with a justification for using ancient dharma *śāstra* texts (most notably the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*) as normative when wanting to ban customs they found unacceptable.[85] In Europe itself, the chronology put forth by the Purāṇic yuga theory was cause for concern. It provided the opponents of Christianity's claim to being the oldest 'revelation' with powerful ammunition.[86] Voltaire was among those who used elements of yuga chronology to assert that Christianity was later than Hinduism, and his ideas were upheld by J. Z. Holwell and A. Dow, two well-known scholars. It was William Jones who, towards the end of the eighteenth century, came to the defense of the higher antiquity of Christianity with his rebuttal of these claims and his (not always tenable) defense of the historical primacy of Moses. He maintained that India could not have had a civilization with written records before 3000 B.C.E.[87]

The yuga theory was to continue its presence in Europe, however, as it became part and parcel of European occult traditions, and it played a significant role in the ideas of occult writers of

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Rudolph Steiner, René Guénon, Jean Phaure, Gaston Georgel, and others.[88]

At the same time, many Indian pundits continued to view any modern proposition of social change as a negative manifestation of the evil Kali Yuga. This was the argument raised by traditionalists against Ram Mohan Roy in the nineteenth century, when his ideas were considered by some as too innovative. His suggestion that the sacred texts be made available to everyone irrespective of class was seen as a symptom of the dharmic decay brought about by Kali.[89]

As for the twentieth century, the pervasive popular presence of the yuga theory in India is reflected in Khushwant Singh's classic novel, *Train to Pakistan*, some of whose characters attribute the tragic events of Northwestern India after the partition of the country, in 1947, to the Kali Yuga (Kalyug).[90] Along similar lines, in a travel book written during many years of living in India in the last decade of the century, Dalrymple relates how a *brāhmaṇa* from a small village in the northern state of Bihar told him that a massacre that had taken place in his village at the hands of 'untouchables' was a consequence of the Kali Yuga.[91] "As I was told again and again on my travels around the subcontinent," Dalrymple writes, "India is now in the throes of the *Kali Yug*..."[92] His book is appropriately called *The Age of Kali*, after one of the essays collected in it.

In another twentieth century example, one of the branches of the Radhasoami movement, while accepting that the world declines morally as the yugas proceed, considers the Kali Yuga to be a time of "unique opportunity," the only one in which "true redemption" is possible. This is so because it was not until recently that the Supreme Being appeared in the world in the form of the movement's founder, Soamiji Maharaj.[93] This interpretation then becomes yet another variant of the process through which Kali is turned into a desirable yuga.

But the importance of the yuga theory at this time lies elsewhere. In many modern interpretations of the system there is a shift in emphasis: instead of stressing—as do the Purāṇas—the

negative aspects of Kali as opposed to former, better yugas, there are expectations of the approaching end of Kali and the beginning of a new Satya Yuga.[94] These expectations can work on several levels. For some, they reflect a hope for better social conditions, as in the case of the lower-class followers of Jai Gurudev, a guru from Mathura. In recent years, his followers have painted walls in many towns with the words "the Satya Yuga is coming."[95] For others, they mainly embody the desire for the onset of a spiritual age of brotherhood. This shift, we might add, synchronizes modern perceptions of the yugas with current worldwide millenarian ideas.

Today, if the world is seen to be changing in important ways, such transformations have to be explained by means of the yuga theory. If such changes are not to be considered as just another manifestation of the evils of the Kali Yuga, then the implication is that a change of yuga is taking place, even if this contradicts the received Purāṇic tradition regarding the duration of the ages. So a balancing act between respecting the tradition and modifying it is required in order to explain certain present-day circumstances.

The way to accomplish this is to reinterpret the theory as it is expounded in the literature or, alternatively, to simply not refer to it unless it is in very general terms. An example of the first procedure is the Brahma Kumari movement, which has a following not only in India but also in Europe and the Americas. According to the teachings of its founder, Dada Lekhraj, the whole cycle of four yugas lasts for only five thousand years (divided into four equal yugas of 1,250 years), and the world is now at the threshold of a new Satya Yuga.[96] The way to salvation at this critical moment in history is to be found in the teachings of the movement.

Another, more radical reinterpretation is that of Swami Yukteswar (1855–1936), the guru of Paramahansa Yogananda. Yogananda is well known, both in India and in the West, for his *Autobiography of a Yogi,* and was the founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship. Yukteswar maintains that modern Hindu alma-

nacs that give dates according to the Kali Yuga are incorrect, be-
cause they are based on the premise that this age lasts for
432,000 years, the standard Purāṇic computation. These calcula-
tions are inaccurate, he states, because they were made by schol-
ars of the Kali Yuga. In his view, the cycle of four yugas lasts
only 12,000 years, that is human years instead of divine years, as
put forth in most Purāṇas.[97] But, more importantly, after the
downward cycle of the yugas has reached its lowest point at the
end of the Kali Yuga, the process is reversed, and the world
starts slowly ascending again through another Kali, through the
Dvāpara and the Tretā, until it reaches the Kṛta again.[98] Yuk-
teswar further links the cycle of yugas to the precession of the
equinoxes, a large astronomical cycle of approximately 26 000
years. We would now be in the ascending half of the cycle, in a
Dvāpara Yuga that started in the year 1700 C.E.[99] So, even if
Yukteswar does not preach the beginning of a new Satya Yuga,
he is still referring to an ascending process, one in which the Kali
Yuga has been left behind.

For an example of the alternative way of dealing with the
problem of reconciling Purāṇic calculations with the idea that the
Kṛta Yuga is at hand—namely by not addressing the problem at
all—we can turn to Vivekananda (1863–1902), for whom the
conviction that we are experiencing the dawn of a new Satya
Yuga was crucial. He writes that the Satya Yuga started on the
date of the birth of his guru, Ramakrishna (1836–1886),[100] whom
he describes as an incarnation of the Lord which "in point of
completeness in revelation, its synthetic harmonizing of all ideals
and its promoting of every sphere of spiritual culture, surpasses
the manifestations of all past ages." Ramakrishna is the bringer of
the new dispensation of the age,[101] and among the characteristics
of the new Satya Yuga are the end of caste and gender distinc-
tions.[102] Ramakrishna incarnated at the beginning of this "mo-
mentous epoch" in order to bring together the civilizations of an-
cient India and Europe, and to remove corruption in religion.[103]
However, Vivekananda also states that the Lord incarnates repeat-
edly in order to protect the Vedas, which are the true religion,

and to protect brahminhood, which is the ministry of that relig-
ion.[104] So, while proclaiming the dawn of a Satya Yuga charac-
terized by the disappearance of distinctions of all kinds, he still
considers this new social and religious expression to be merely an
update of Vedic religion.[105]

We must also mention Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), the in-
fluential freedom fighter who later became a yogi and a spiritual
teacher. Aurobindo, who often expressed his indebtedness to
Vivekananda, explicitly disengages himself from the need to fol-
low Purāṇic calculations concerning the duration of the yugas.[106]
For him, the yugas simply "indicate successive periods in the cy-
clic wheel of evolution, the perfect state, decline and disintegra-
tion of successive ages of humanity followed by a new birth."[107]
But Aurobindo also makes frequent reference to the arrival of a
new Satya Yuga, although he seems to oscillate between taking it
as something that is cosmically determined and considering it a
condition of society that can be propelled by human action. At
one point he states that, despite its enduring effects, Kali has now
ended and "the time is at hand for a first movement upward, the
first attempt to build up a new harmony and perfection."[108]

He writes of both "the return of the *satyayuga* of national
greatness" for India through self-rule (*swaraj*), and of the need to
establish a practice of yoga that will "prepare a perfect humanity
and help in the restoration of the Satya Yuga."[109] Aurobindo also
criticizes the "darkened Pandits of the Kaliyuga" and pleads for
the recovery of "true Brahminhood and Kshatriyahood."[110] "For
the *satyayuga* to return," he writes, "we must get back the *brah-
mateja* ['the spiritual force of brahmins'] and make it general."[111]

Along similar lines, in a speech delivered in 1919, M. K. (Ma-
hatma) Gandhi (1869–1948) spoke of a new Satya Yuga: "What I
am seeking is the resurgence of *Satya Yuga* in India. We had a
Golden Age at one time. In that age men and women in India
spontaneously and automatically spoke only the truth."[112] This
Satya Yuga was apparently not to be established automatically,
but required human participation: "I appeal to you to show me
the love that will bring back *Satya Yuga*."[113] "We are dreaming,"

he wrote in a letter in 1941 "of ushering in a new age, the age of *ahimsa*."[114]

At this point we must also refer to the Vedic revivalist Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–1883), founder of the Arya Samaj. Although Dayananda rarely wrote about the yugas, his teachings clearly reflect the idea of a decadent age that started at the time of the events recounted in the *Mahābhārata*. Following his teacher, Swami Virjananda (c.1779–1868), Dayananda considered most post-Vedic literature to be degraded and inferior to the Vedas. Classical Hinduism, therefore, is corrupt and deviant, so true knowledge should be sought in the Vedas alone.[115] What makes these ideas interesting is that without talking directly about the yugas, Dayananda strongly criticizes the '*kali*' condition of post-*Mahābhārata* literature and calls for a return to the teachings of the Vedas. A return, in effect, to the Kṛta Yuga after a prolonged dark period.[116]

And Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the famous Nobel laureate poet, wrote shortly after World War I that "the door of the new Age has been flung open at the trumpet blast of a great war," and then compared the events of that time to the circumstances surrounding the *Mahābhārata* war.[117]

An interesting case of an intermediate position between the need to respect the Purāṇic tradition concerning the duration of the yugas and the desire to proclaim the beginning of a new age, is offered by followers of Bhaktivedanta Swami, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The movement is very strict in its adherence to Vaiṣṇava Purāṇic authority, so there can be no question that we are currently in the Kali Yuga—which is why singing the name of Kṛṣṇa is considered the only way to liberation; such is the Kali Yuga dharma, as established by Caitanya in the 16th century.

Nevertheless, in recent literature some of the Swami's disciples have quoted from one of the latest Purāṇas, the *Brahmavaivarta* (16th century?), in support of the theory that a 'golden age' within the Kali Yuga was inaugurated by their spiritual preceptor. The Purāṇa states that, despite Kṛṣṇa's departure at the onset of

Kali, Hari will remain on Earth for 10,000 years by means of teachings, sacred sites, and the presence of his devout followers. Gaṅgā, the river Ganges, shall remain on Earth for the first 5,000 of those years. Bhaktivedanta Swami's disciples somehow interpret this to mean that a 10,000 year 'golden age' within the Kali Yuga will start 5,000 years after the onset of Kali. If we count from 3102 B.C.E., the traditional date for the beginning of Kali, these 5,000 years would have elapsed by the end of the nineteenth century, which should then have witnessed the arrival of this 'golden age.' This happens to be the time of Bhaktivedanta Swami's birth, which took place in 1896.[118]

This 5,000 year period can be compared to the 5,000 year cycle put forth by Dada Lekhraj, of the Brahma Kumari movement. Both cycles are considered to end around the time of the appearance of each movement's founder, the difference being that to Bhaktivedanta Swami's disciples this is the beginning of an interlude within the long-lasting Kali Yuga, whereas for the Brahma Kumaris it represents the closing of the entire cycle of four yugas conceived as the cycle of creation and destruction.[119]

These are only a few examples of the importance of the yuga theory in modern religious movements. Many more could be cited, ranging from the Theosophical Society and movements influenced by it,[120] to the Transcendental Meditation movement of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who, in 1975, formally inaugurated the 'Age of Enlightenment.'[121] It would appear that no modern movement is really complete if it does not herald the dawn of a new, positive yuga.[122] For this, the Satya Yuga is a powerful symbol. It is important to note that the conviction that a change of yuga is at hand instills a sense of urgency that gives strength and vitality to a movement. There is an important mission to be accomplished and one must act without delay.[123] It also offers hope in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties.

In the political sphere, on the other hand, the theme also appears, albeit in a somewhat oblique manner. Without directly using the Satya Yuga image, the approaching prosperous and bountiful new age has been invoked by modern politicians in terms of

the *rāmarājya*, Rāma's righteous, Kṛta-like kingdom.[124] Even Gandhi used the idea of *rāmrāj* to articulate his vision of a dharmic government.[125] In the second half of the twentieth century the image of a leader stretching a bow while aiming his arrow at the sky in imitation of Rāma was used for political ends. We know that the image of Rāma's rule has been used for similar purposes since around the twelfth century, but it has now made an interesting comeback.[126]

Today, the yuga theory retains its vital importance in religious movements and it continues to be a useful and powerful means for proposing (and occasionally opposing) important social, religious, and political change. It is often invoked for proclaiming the dawn of a new, prosperous and righteous age.

Notes

[1] *idaṃ śreya idaṃ śreya ity evaṃ prasthito janaḥ / yo hi yasmin rato dharme sa taṃ pujāyate sadā ||* 14.48.26. Compare the following Buddhist statement from the Pali Canon: "experts cling to their own views, they argue this and that and say 'whoever knows this, knows the [Buddhist] dharma, whoever rejects this, is not accomplished.'" *sakaṃ sakaṃ diṭṭhi paribbasānā viggayha nānā kusalā vadanti: 'yo evaṃ jānāti, sa vedi dhammaṃ, idaṃ paṭikkosam akevalī so.'* *Sutta Nipāta* 4.12.878 (Aṭṭhakavagga), PTS ed. p. 171.

[2] 3.297.54-55, 71. On the term *ānṛśaṃsya*, see Shulman 1996:156-158.

[3] So, for instance, in 12.264.19, where *ahiṃsā* is said to be the "complete dharma," *sakalo dharmo*. See also 12.110.10-11.

[4] 14.49.2-3.

[5] The terms are *dhyāna*, *yajña*, *pradāna*, *tapas*, and *svādhyāya*, respectively; 14.48.14-26.

[6] 12.242.1-4. See also 1.159.13, where celibacy, *brahmacarya*, is said to be the highest dharma.

[7] 13.121.1, 15-17.

[8] 1.69.23.

[9] *nāsti satyāt paro dharmo na satyād vidyate param / na hi tīvrataraṃ kiṃcid anṛtād iha vidyate ||* 1.69.24.

[10] *ChU* 2.23.1. I accept Olivelle's (1996b:217) novel reading of this passage; he contends that it does not refer directly to the division of *āśramas*, as is generally assumed.

[11] *eṣa me sarvadharmāṇāṃ dharmo 'dhikatamo mataḥ / yad bhaktyā puṇḍarīkākṣaṃ stavair arcen naraḥ sadā //* 13.135.8.

[12] *sarvadharmān parityajya māṃ ekaṃ śaraṇaṃ vraja / ahaṃ tvā sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ //* 6.40.66 (*BhG* 18.66). I cannot fully agree with van Buitenen's (1981:28) assertion that the *Gītā* is "suprasectarian." Incidentally, it is difficult to avoid thinking that Kṛṣṇa's choice of words in this verse could be a response to Buddhism, which emphasizes going to the Buddha, the saṅgha, and the (Buddhist) dharma for protection.

[13] *anye kṛtayuge dharmās tretāyāṃ dvāpare 'pare / anye kaliyuge dharmā yathāśaktikṛtā iva // tapaḥ paraṃ kṛtayuge tretāyāṃ jñānam uttamam / dvāpare yajñam evāhur dānam eva kalau yuge //* 12.224.26-27. The first of these two verses is repeated at 12.252.8, where it is preceded by: "We hear that the teachings of the Vedas wane according to the yuga," *vedavādāś cānuyugaṃ hrasantīti ha naḥ śrutam /* (12.252.7cd). In the Nārāyaṇīya, Brahmā is said to create the yuga dharmas (12.336.29).

[14] *MDhŚ* 1.85-86. For a comparison of the passages in both texts, and a discussion of their source, see Bühler [1886] 1992:lxxxiii ff.

[15] On the importance of *dāna* in these two books, see Columbus 1996.

[16] See, for instance, 13.62.

[17] See above, Chapter 3, note 20. The entire section in the CE is Appendix 1, No. 14, lines 346-366.

[18] For references in Buddhism see Harvey [1990] 1995:42-43, 123, 198-199. For Jainism, see Jaini [1979] 1990:106, 181, 187, 218, 260. A detailed description of the rules of *dāna* in Jainism is included in Williams 1963:149-166. We must point out, however, that in Buddhism and Jainism *dāna* often means giving to their own monks or ascetics.

[19] According to Lamotte [1958] 1976:212, 578, 586. The Sanskrit terms for the first four are *vimokṣa, samādhi, śīladhara,* and *bahuśruta.* The similarity between these ideas and the yuga dharma verse in the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* had been noticed by Lingat 1962:12.

[20] There are at least two reasons why *dāna* would have been more appealing than *ahiṃsā* to the *brāhmaṇas* as the dharma of the Kali Yuga. In the first place, *dāna* was often taken to mean giving to them; in the

second place, although *ahiṃsā* was gaining importance in Hinduism there was always the possibility of an implied attack on ritual sacrifices when advocating *ahiṃsā* (even though sacrifice had already, and conveniently, been placed in an earlier yuga). Indeed, one of the main attacks leveled against the Vedic tradition by the 'heterodoxies' was that it advocated *hiṃsā* (injury) through the practice of sacrifices. See, e.g., the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* (7.9), which accuses those who see the ritual texts as advocating a "violent dharma" (*hiṃsakadharma*) of being demons (*asuras*). See also *Mbh* 14.28.6–28, where the notion of ritual sacrifice as *hiṃsā* is rejected.

[21] As was recognized by Pocock [1967] 1980:312. In a similar vein, O'Flaherty ([1976] 1980:202) calls the Kali Yuga "the age of reality," while Inden (1990:238) considers it to be a notion "which theologians used to explain one's present world and also to imply a course of action." And according to Lutgendorf (1991:371), while discussing the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tulsidas: "...like the Old Testament story of the Fall, the 'Dark Age' is best regarded as a metaphor for the human condition, an expression of the inevitability of vitiation and decline and of the unending battle to retain purity and potency."

[22] *Caraka Saṃhitā* 3.3.24.

[23] "...one's years run out," literally "the year is destroyed."

[24] *yuge yuge dharmapādaḥ krameṇānena hīyate / guṇapādaś ca bhūtānām evaṃ lokaḥ pralīyate // saṃvatsaraśate pūrṇe yāti saṃvatsaraḥ kṣayam / dehinām āyuṣaḥ kāle yatra yanmānam iṣyate // iti vikārāṇāṃ prāgutpattihetur ukto bhavati // Caraka Saṃhitā* 3.3.25–27. The second verse is difficult, and I believe this to be the most reasonable translation. The commentator, Cakrapāṇidatta, is probably right in seeing here a reference to the tradition that the life expectancy in the Kali Yuga is only 100 years. It has alternatively been translated to mean that every hundred years the life-span is reduced by one year (P. Sharma 1981:319; Wujastik 1998:85), but such a reading does not find support in any other text dealing with the yugas.

[25] For an illustration of how the Gupta astronomers could have arrived at this date using Greek planetary tables, see Pingree 1981a:555. For a discussion, see González-Reimann 1988:128–130.

[26] Interestingly, the Haṭkar Dhangars, a nomadic shepherd community living today in Maharashtra, believe in a simplified yuga theory that only includes the Satya (Kṛta) Yuga and the Kali Yuga. See Son-

theimer 1996:267.

[27] Such as the *nirguṇī bhakti* movement, which was against the *varṇa-āśrama* dharma, the theory of *avatāras*, and much of Purāṇic mythology, but never questioned—and in fact embraced—the yuga theory (see Lorenzen 1995:16-17; and the mentions of the *nirguṇī* poets Kabīr, Ravidās and Nānak later in this chapter). All of this contradicts van der Veer (1993:31, 58), who apparently views the yuga theory as part of a purely brahmanical discourse while, in fact, belief in the yuga cycles transcended class and sectarian boundaries. On the belief in the yugas among lower classes see Lorenzen 1995:23-24; Schaller 1993:133, 201-202; Sarkar 1989:1, 5-7; Khan 1996, 1997, 2000; Sontheimer 1996; and Chopra 1993:53. Of special interest is Khan 1997, 2000, who studies the combination of the yuga theory with Islamic Ismaili messianic themes among the Nizari and other sects of North-Western India from the 15th century onwards. For the use of the yugas by the Munda leader Birsa Munda in the late 19th century, see Luker 1998:58, 61.

[28] The argument about invaders was often used against Muslims. Some late medieval commentators of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for instance, considered the invading Muslims to be the *rākṣasas* of the Kali Yuga (Pollock 1991:70, 251; on *Rām* 3.3.24). For his part, Vṛndāvana Dāsa (16th century), the author of the first biography of Caitanya written in Bengali, considers Caitanya's role as the *avatāra* of the Kali Yuga to include ending the Muslim domination of Bengal (see Dimock and Stewart, in Dimock 1999:87). An 11th century inscription that records the restoration of the Somanātha temple in Gujarat after its destruction by the invading forces of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, attributes this calamity to the Kali Yuga (Davis 1995:627-633). And the portrayal of Kalkin destroying foreigners in the *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva, the renowned 12th century Vaiṣṇava poet, has been construed as a desire to be saved from invading Muslims (Siegel 1978:243, note 25). Similarly, Turbiani (1983:417) thinks that Tulsidas "considered Islām as an effect of the cosmic decay produced by *Kaliyug*." The early 18th century writer Bhāratacandra, in his description of Satya Pīr—a Bengali Muslim holy man later considered an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu—decries the disintegration of the *varṇa* structure in the Kali Yuga under the power of foreign Muslims (Stewart 1995:584). For Birsa Munda (see previous note), on the other hand, the end of British rule would be equivalent to the end of the Kali Yuga.

29 For more references to complaints that blame the breakup of the class system on the Kali Yuga, see Yadava 1973:6 ff., 410.

30 This refocusing of the yugas mainly around issues of morality and righteousness is, to some extent, akin to the way the *Rāmāyaṇa* redefined dharma as not being limited to following the duties of one's own class, but as righteousness in a broader sense, closely related to the ideal, Kṛta Yuga-like, rule of Rāma, the *rāmarājya*. See Pollock 1986:68–73, and Lutgendorf 1991:354.

31 See Lorenzen 1972:24.

32 *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 3.17.35–3.18.36; see also the *Śiva Purāṇa* 2.5.4.1–36, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.3.24, 10.40.22, 11.4.22. That heretic teachers who did not accept the existence of the *ātman* and criticized the Vedas and animal sacrifices were really gods who incarnated in order to confuse—and thus destroy—the demons, is an idea that had been stated earlier in the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* (7.8–10), but with no mention of the yugas (see note 20 above). As in the case of the competing dharmas of the *Mbh*, this idea was later incorporated into the yuga theory when it became the dominant mythical/historical frame of reference.

33 The significance of the white teeth is unclear.

34 1. *tataḥ kaliyugasyādau bhūtvā rājataruṃ śritaḥ* / 2. *bhāṣayā māghadhenaiva dharmarājagṛhe vadan* / 3. *kāṣāyavastrasaṃvīto muṇḍitaḥ śukladantavān* / 4. *śuddhodanasuto buddho mohayiṣyāmi mānavān* / 5. *śūdrāḥ śrāddheṣu bhojyante mayi buddhatvam āgate* / 6. *bhaviṣyanti narāḥ sarve muṇḍāḥ kāṣāyasaṃvṛtāḥ* / 7. *anadhyāyā bhaviṣyanti viprāś cāgnivivarjitāḥ* / ... 18. *tataḥ kaliyugasyānte brāhmaṇo haripiṅgalaḥ* / 19. *kalkir viṣṇuyaśaḥputro yājñavalkyapurohitaḥ* / 20. *sahāyā brāhmaṇāḥ sarve tair ahaṃ sahitaḥ punaḥ* / 21. *mlecchān utsādayiṣyāmi pāṣaṇḍāṃś caiva sarvaśaḥ* / Book 12, Appendix 31, lines 1–7, 18–21.

35 *tataś caiva punargatvā marusthalyāṃ tvayā vibho* / *sthātavyaṃ ca svadharmeṇa kalir yā vatsa mā vrajet* // *pravṛtte tu yuge tasmin svīyo dharmaḥ prakāśyatām* / *śiṣyaiś ca pratiśiṣyaiś ca vartanīyas tvayā punaḥ* // *madājñayā bhavaddharmo vistāraṃ yāsyati dhruvam* / *madanujñāparo nityaṃ gatiṃ prāpsyasi māmakīm* // *ŚP* 2.5.4.20–22. As in the case of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (above, note 32), this text seems to combine Buddhism and Jainism.

36 In practice, the Buddhist 'great beings' served a function equivalent to that of Purāṇic gods. Up to the seventh century, Mahāyāna Buddhism produced an extensive body of literature in Sanskrit known as the *sūtra*

literature, of which this text forms a part. For a discussion on the conflict between the cults of Avalokiteśvara and Maheśvara (Śiva), see Deshpande 1997:457-460.

[37] *bhaviṣyasi tvaṃ maheśvaraḥ kaliyuge pratipanne / kaṣṭasattvadhātusamutpanna ādideva ākhyāyase sraṣṭāraṃ kartāram / te sarvasattvā bodhimārgeṇa viprahīṇā bhaviṣyanti ya īdṛśapṛthagjaneṣu sattveṣu sāṃkathyaṃ kurvanti //* Kāraṇḍavyūha 4, in Vaidya 1961:265.

[38] *Gītagovinda* 1.13. The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.5.13-14), which is practically contemporaneous with Jayadeva, has a very similar positive description. So does the *Padma* (7.6.188), although this Purāṇa attacks Buddhism elsewhere (see below, note 59). The moral ambiguity of the Buddha as *avatāra* of Viṣṇu has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. For a long analysis of the Buddha *avatāra*, including primary and secondary references, see O'Flaherty [1976] 1980, Chapter 7 (pp. 174-211), "The Corruption of Demons and Men: The False Avatar."

[39] The *āśrama* system itself provided another way of solving the conflict, especially with respect to the contrast between life within society (historical time) and renunciation (personal time). But Olivelle (1993:96, 100) is probably right in concluding that this did not happen as a defensive reaction by 'conservative' *brāhmaṇas*, as usually assumed, but, instead, as an attempt by 'liberal' *brāhmaṇas* to make dharma more inclusive. For the relationship between the yuga theory and the *āśrama* system, particularly regarding renunciation, see Olivelle 1993: 234-237.

[40] For the difficulties in dating the Dharma Śāstras see Lingat 1973:123-132.

[41] *Parāśara Smṛti* 1.22-24. The text states at the outset (1.2 ff.) that it will expound the dharma established for mankind in the Kali Yuga.

[42] Kane 1962:1266-1274.

[43] The dates are Kane's estimates (1946:968). For a detailed description of the *kalivarjyas* see Kane 1946:926-968.

[44] See Lingat 1973:193, and 1962:11-12. Medhātithi glosses "dharma" in *MDhŚ* 1.85 as "quality," *guṇa*.

[45] Or: "by reciting/repeating [the name of] Keśava," *dhyāyan kṛte yajan yajñais tretāyāṃ dvāpare 'rcayan / yadāpnoti tadāpnoti kalau saṃkīrtya keśava //* Viṣṇu Purāṇa 6.2.17. The dates for the Purāṇas are approximate; for a survey of different opinions see L. Rocher 1986.

[46] *kṛte yad dhyāyato viṣṇuṃ tretāyāṃ yajato makhaiḥ / dvāpare paricaryāyāṃ kalau tad dhari kīrtanāt //* Bhāgavata Purāṇa 12.3.52.

[47] *BhP* 11.5.35.

[48] *yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata / abhyutthānam adharma-sya tadātmānaṃ sṛjāmy aham // paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām / dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge //* BhG 4.7-8 (Mbh 6.26.7-8).

[49] It is important to remember that the expression *yuge yuge.* is attested already in the *Ṛg Veda*, where it probably means 'in every generation,' or 'in every age,' in a general way. In the *RV* it is employed for indicating—or asking for—the constant presence of a certain god, the implication being that these gods should always be accessible to mankind. And this is precisely the import of Kṛṣṇa's statement, he is assuring his followers of his presence whenever it is required. So, Kṛṣṇa could very well be using an old expression simply to say that he is always within reach, without any intended reference to the yugas. Even Aurobindo (1970-1972, vol. 22, *Letters on Yoga*:405) thought the expression was used in the *BhG* in a general, non-technical sense. There are six occurrences of *yuge yuge* in the *RV*: 1.139.8 (to the Maruts); 3.26.3, 6.8.5, 6.15.8 (to Agni); 6.36.5 (to Indra); and 10.94.12, which refers to the endurance of the 'fathers' of the ritual pressing stones, that is, the mountains. Of these six, *RV* 1.139.8 is repeated in *Atharva Veda* 20.67.2, and *RV* 6.15.8 is repeated in *Sāma Veda* 2.918 (2.7.2.34). It may be significant that the *Sāma* was considered to be the best Veda by Kṛṣṇa and his audience, according to *BhG* 10.22 (*Mbh* 6.32.22).

[50] Note also, as has been pointed out by van Buitenen (1981:28), that in the *Gītā* there is no mention of Kṛṣṇa being an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The same is the case with Paraśurāma and Kṛṣṇa in the *Yuga Purāṇa* (Mitchiner 1986:47).

[51] Majumdar 1969:169, 171.

[52] *VP* 6.2.34, 39-40; see also 6.1.60. Medhātithi, the commentator of the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*, points out that each of the successive dharmas prescribed by Manu for the different yugas requires less effort than its predecessor, in accordance with the declining capacities of human beings as the yugas advance (Medhātithi, on *MDhŚ* 1.86).

[53] *BhP* 11.5.36-38.

[54] For the reference, see above, Chapter 4, note 42.

[55] McLeod 1995:456–458.

[56] *Vāṇī* 32.1/4 (see also 84, refrain), in Callewaert and Friedlander 1992:121. See also Schaller 1993:133–134.

[57] Although Vaudeville (1987:27) suggests that *nirguṇa* should here rather be construed as "beyond the three *guṇas,*" and points out that the Sants often come close to the idea of a personal divinity, possibly under Vaiṣṇava influence.

[58] An indication of how widespread this notion was to become (i.e. the notion that the Kali Yuga is a time when less effort is required) can be seen in the following words of M. K. Gandhi with reference to his call for spinning and weaving as a means of protest: "In this Kali Yuga, you get more fruit for less work. It is an easy dharma to spin and weave, whereby you can achieve your objective and reach the goal," "Speech at Wardha," 1940, Collected Works vol. 79:278.

[59] *daityānāṃ nāśanārthāya viṣṇunā buddharūpiṇā / bauddhaśāstram asat proktaṃ nagnanīlapaṭādikam // māyāvādam asac chāstraṃ pracchannaṃ bauddha* [sic] *ucyate / mayaiva kathitaṃ devi kalau brāhmaṇarūpiṇā //* PP 6.236.6–7. These verses are part of a two-chapter section (6.235–236) that surely constitutes one of the most fiercely sectarian statements to be found in the Purāṇas. These two chapters are probably more recent than the rest of the text by as much as a few centuries (Hazra [1975] 1987:126). Viṣṇu's and Śiva's actions are said to be part of an elaborate celestial conspiracy meant to destroy all the demons; which is to say all non-Vaiṣṇavas. Śiva is instructed by Viṣṇu—the Supreme God—to incarnate as different people and teach all the doctrines deemed unacceptable by the Purāṇic composer. The text expressly targets Śaiva traditions like the Pāśupatas; the materialist Cārvākas; and the schools of Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya and Vedānta. It also rates the Purāṇas and the Smṛtis as either conducive to liberation, heaven, or hell. Predictably, the Purāṇas that lead to liberation are all Vaiṣṇava: the *Viṣṇu,* the *Nāradīya,* the *Bhāgavata,* the *Garuḍa,* the *Varāha,* and the *Padma* itself.

[60] O'Flaherty [1976] 1980:208–209.

[61] O'Flaherty [1976] 1980:209–210. See also Sheridan 1992:112–113. Hazra (above, note 59) suggests that the *Padma Purāṇa* attack on Śaṅkara and others could have been added by Madhva's followers.

[62] In this way, these two 'negative' doctrines of the Kali Yuga—Buddhism and Śaṅkara's *māyāvāda*—are easily disposed of. See the *Cai-*

tanyacaritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmi (16th century), Ādi-Līlā, 7.108-134, as translated and commented on by Bhaktivedanta Swami (1973:91-129). For the Swami's 'emergency' explanation, see Bhaktivedanta 1982:156. According to one of his disciples, Bhaktivedanta Swami wrote commentaries on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in order to destroy "the demoniac ignorance of this age" (Lokanath Swami, in Dasa & Dasa 1996:11).

[63] *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.26.7-16; see also 1.28.42. According to Hazra ([1975] 1987:58), the *KP* was originally a Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra text that was later appropriated by the Śaiva Pāśupatas.

[64] *KP* 1.27.18-19.

[65] *kalau rudro mahādevo lokānām īśvaraḥ paraḥ / na devatā bhaven nṛṇām devatānāṃ ca daivatam // KP* 1.28.32.

[66] *KP* 1.28.37. See also note 36, above, and the discussion it refers to.

[67] *KP* 1.27.17. This list coincides with the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (1.8.64). See also Patil [1946] 1973:77.

[68] *prāpte kalāv ahaha duṣṭatare ca kāle na tvāṃ bhajanti manujā nanu vañcitās te / dhūrtaiḥ purāṇacaturair hariśaṅkarāṇāṃ sevāparāś ca vihitās tava nirmitānām // DBhP* 5.19.12.

[69] *DBhP* 6.11.56-57.

[70] *DBhP* 6.11.41.

[71] *DBhP* 6.11.42.

[72] See Lorenzen 1987:110-111.

[73] *Bījak*, Śabda, 11; Hess and Singh 1983:47. Kabīr also establishes himself as supreme in the four yugas: "Kabīr's is the true word: look in your hearts and think. They strain their brains but don't understand, though I've said it for four ages." *Bījak*, Sākhī, 74; translated by Hess and Singh 1983:96-97. Kabīr's followers even turned him into a Purāṇa-style *avatāra* that incarnated in every yuga, see Thukral 1995:223.

[74] As reported by Eck 1983:159-160.

[75] Ibid.:219-220. See also the *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.35.37.

[76] *dhyānaṃ kṛte mokṣahetus tretāyāṃ tac caiva tapaḥ / dvāpare tad dvayaṃ yajñāḥ kalau gaṅgaiva kevalam // Skanda Purāṇa* 4.27.19 (Kāśī Khaṇḍa).

[77] The *Kūrma Purāṇa* (1.27.10) prescribes going to Varanasi during the

Kali Yuga to atone for one's misdeeds.

[78] Erndl 1993:163. The Goddess takes on different local forms, including some of recent creation such as Vaiṣṇo Devī and Santoṣī Mā. For their connection with the yugas see Erndl:40–42, 130–131, 138, 145. See also the reference to Khīr Bhavānī, below, note 126.

[79] Lutgendorf 1994:230, 217.

[80] See *Padma Purāṇa* 6.193.11 ff. This is part of a long section (PP 6.193–198) that extols Kṛṣṇa, *bhakti* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as the means of salvation in the Kali Yuga.

[81] *kṛte śrutyukta ācāras tretāyām smṛtisaṃbhavaḥ / dvāpare tu purāṇoktam* [sic] *kalau āgama* [sic] *kevalam //* Quoted by Avalon [1913] 1972:1 (intro.), who, however, does not provide the exact reference (and I have not been able to trace it). *Ācāra* is here the equivalent of dharma. The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (1, passim) deals with this in detail; see Avalon [1913] 1972:5–14. I have taken the date of the *Kulārṇava* from Goudriaan 1979:11; who gets it from Gunnar Carlstedt, *Studier i Kularnava-tantra*, 1974.

[82] *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* 2.3–9; in Avalon [1913] 1972:15–16.

[83] *MT* 4.68–69; in Avalon [1913] 1972:54.

[84] Avalon 1978:40. For a lengthy discussion on yuga *śāstra* see ibid.:35 ff.

[85] According to R. Rocher, "A feature of [18th century British] orientalist scholarship that had a profound impact on government was its promotion of the distant past as normative. This notion was born of the coincidence of two distinct strands, the European Enlightenment and the Indian Purāṇic tradition, both of which conceived the world to have undergone a progressive deterioration" (R. Rocher 1993:242; see also 226–231). And Halbfass writes (1988:60): "India thus illustrates the theme of the eclipse of the 'natural light' through superstition and ritualism, a theme that enjoyed great popularity among thinkers of the Enlightenment."

[86] Christianity, of course, is here meant to include the Hebrew Bible.

[87] See Marshall 1970:25–36. This book includes writings by Holwell, Dow, Jones and others.

[88] Particularly influential was Guénon [1937] 1970. His ideas on these and other matters have influenced many subsequent occult writers. Kramrisch, in her well known work *The Hindu Temple* ([1946] 1976,

vol. 1:36–37), uncritically accepts Guénon's assertion that the yuga theory is based on the precession of the equinoxes. For the other authors see Steiner 1971, Phaure 1973, and Georgel 1976. According to Steiner, the Kali yuga ended around the beginning of the 20th century, when he began his public teaching (see Ahern 1984: 108, 127-128, 130).

89 Halbfass 1988:210-211. Roy (c.1774-1833) was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj. On the important role played by the Kali (Koli) yuga theme in the popular culture of 19th century Bengal, see Sarkar 1989:6, 33-46. For its importance in the Tamil Jagir society of the late 18th century, and its combination with millennial notions by some British administrators of the time, see Irschick 1994:70-72.

90 See pp. 40, 80, 97. In fact, the second chapter of the novel is called Kalyug.

91 Dalrymple [1998] 2000:25. This same *brāhmaṇa* voiced his intense fear of the situation after the massacre, and is quoted as having said the following about the perpetrators: "These low people are enjoying what has happened. They have grown fat and behave like they are Brahmins... "The lower castes are rising up. Everything is falling apart," (ibid.:24, 25). This echoes the complaints detailed in the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the *Mahābhārata* (see Chapter 3, above), where the reversal of class roles is one of the main symptoms of decay at yugānta.

92 Dalrymple [1998] 2000:11.

93 Babb 1986:44-45. The movement was apparently founded in the 19th century (ibid.:17).

94 As had earlier been the case with Yudhiṣṭhira's question to Mārkaṇḍeya in the *Mahābhārata*, and with the predictions of the *Yuga Purāṇa* (see above, Chapter 3). There, as here, I referred to a shift in emphasis.

95 *satyug ayega*, Chopra 1993:53. See also the reference to Birsa Munda, above, note 28.

96 Babb 1986:113 ff.

97 Interestingly, the yuga theory most likely did first take the years to be human years, and only later turned them into divine years. So one might say that Yukteswar is right in ascribing the Purāṇic calculations to scholars of the Kali Yuga!

[98] Again, whether he is aware of it or not, Yukteswar is recycling early ideas here. The cosmic cycle is viewed by Jainism as divided into an ascending and a descending half (*utsarpiṇī* and *avasarpiṇī*), and Jain ideas probably influenced the Gupta astronomer Āryabhaṭa (5th–6th centuries), who also divided the mahāyuga into two halves bearing these same names (*Āryabhaṭīya* 3.9, in Shukla and Sarma 1976:39). Also, a Buddhist version of the yugas posits an ascending progression of the four yugas after the descending series, just like in Yukteswar's system (see Jacobi [1908] 1964:202; and de la Vallée Poussin [1908] 1964:189). This division of the cycle into an ascending and a descending half is, in turn, no doubt based on the Vedic tradition of dividing the three main astronomical cycles—the day, the year and the lunar month—in such a way. For a long discussion, see González-Reimann 1988:43–53; 112–116. Āryabhaṭa also considered the four yugas to be of equal length, thus ignoring the 4-3-2-1 sequence established by the names of the dice throws.

[99] Yukteswar 1963:vii–xxii.

[100] Vivekananda 1948–1951, vol. 6:295, 302. This establishes an interesting symmetry with the Purāṇic tradition that Kṛṣṇa's death marked the beginning of the Kali Yuga.

[101] Ibid.:158–159.

[102] Ibid.:302–303.

[103] Ibid.:158, 417–418, 420.

[104] Ibid.:157.

[105] In addition to the above references, see also vol. 3:111–112; vol. 5:304–305. We can also mention Rama Coomaraswamy (1996:111, 113), the son of A.K. Coomaraswamy, who writes of the approaching end of the Kali Yuga without elaborating on the subject.

[106] "...Too much weight need not be put on the exact figures about the Yugas in the Purana ... the mathematical calculations are not the important element," Aurobindo 1970–1972, vol. 22, *Letters on Yoga*:403.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Aurobindo, vol. 16, *The Supramental Manifestation*:412.

[109] Aurobindo, vol. 1, *Bande Mataram*:902 (written in 1908), and vol. 27, *Supplement*:432 (written in 1913?).

[110] Aurobindo vol. 17, *The Hour of God*:122.

[111] Aurobindo, vol. 2, *Karmayogin*:12. For more relevant passages see vol. 17: 167, 255; vol. 18:635; vol. 20:24-25; vol. 26:370; and vol. 27:472, 475-476.

[112] "Speech at Bhagini Samaj," Collected Works, vol. 19:15. Note that Gandhi here seems to imply that the yugas apply only to India, as did early texts.

[113] Ibid.

[114] "Letter to Vithaldas Jerajani," Collected Works vol. 81:115-116. In 1921 he had written: "I do not anticipate a time in India or the world when *all* will be followers of ahimsa. Police there will be even in *Satya Yuga*. But I do contemplate a time, when in India we shall rely less on brute force and more on soul force, when the *Brahman* in man will hold supremacy," "Notes," Collected Works vol. 23:185.

[115] According to Sarda (1968:37), Virjananda said the following to Dayananda: "...the Sanskrit is divisible into two periods, the Ante-Mahabharata and the Post-Mahabharata. The doctrines embodied in the Ante-Mahabharata Literature clearly indicate the high water mark of spiritual, moral and intellectual greatness reached in ancient times by the Aryas...In the Post-Mahabharata period, however, the study of those works has been neglected; and intensely prejudiced and narrow-minded men have written books, the study of which has brought to ruin the cause of Dharma." See also Jordens 1978:36-39.

[116] Karve (1969:230, 238-239) also criticizes post-*Mahābhārata* Hinduism, although on different grounds. She contrasts the realism and harshness of the Epic style to the romanticized, mainly *bhakti* literature of later times: "the hard outline of real life vanished entirely and in its place was created a dream world in which the hero and the heroine always lived happily ever after... After the Mahabharata period why did all literature become so soggy with sentiment?"

[117] Tagore 1921:431. See also Tagore 1917:123, "The call has come to every individual in the present age to prepare himself and his surroundings for this dawn of a new era when man shall discover his soul in the spiritual unity of all human beings."

[118] This curious reading of the Purāṇa's descriptions is not supported by the text. See Appendix F for textual references as well as the text and translation of a relevant passage from the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*.

[119] Dada Lekhraj's interpretation is, then, probably closer to those earlier versions of the yuga theory that considered the fourfold yuga as a cy-

cle of creation and destruction. According to Dada Lekhraj, the *Mahā-
bhārata* describes the end of the world at the closing of the previous
four yugas (Babb 1986:125-126). In other words, it deals with the
yugānta, in the Epic sense of the word.

[120] An interesting case of influence by the Theosophical Society and,
particularly, the writings of its founder, H. Blavatsky, is the early 20th
century Russian artist and Himalayan explorer Nicholas Roerich, whose
wife translated Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* into Russian (Decter
1989:107). In his book *Himalayas: Abode of Light*, Roerich quotes the
Purāṇas and writes with enthusiasm of the imminent arrival of the
Satya Yuga and the appearance of Kalkin, or his Buddhist equivalent,
Maitreya (Roerich 1947:64-70, 157). The idea of a coming savior—
symbolized not only by Kalkin or Maitreya, but also by parallel
expectations in other religions—is one of the most prevalent themes of
his paintings and poetry. Besides being an accomplished painter,
Roerich designed sets and costumes for stage performances of operas,
ballets and plays by composers such as Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov,
Lope de Vega, Ibsen, Maeterlinck and Stravinsky (Decter 1989:71-93).
Among the interesting anecdotal details about Roerich: it was
apparently his idea to include the symbol of the Great Pyramid on the
U.S. dollar bill; he made the suggestion in 1934 to then U.S. Secretary
of Agriculture Henry Wallace, a follower of Roerich's ideas (ibid.:134).

[121] "We are on the threshold of a new age in which enlightenment...is
increasingly guiding the destiny of human life... The age of ignorance
is receding, and the sunshine of the Age of Enlightenment is on its
way to bring fulfillment to the noblest aspirations of mankind," Ma-
harishi Mahesh Yogi 1978:4. Although the Maharishi avoids the terms
Kali Yuga and Kṛta Yuga, there is no doubt that is what he is referring
to. A phrase like "the seasons will come on time, crops will be abun-
dant" (1977, inside cover), is unmistakable yuga terminology.
Years earlier, Meher Baba (1894-1969) had spoken in similar terms
about a new humanity. In 1954 he proclaimed that he would inaugurate
a 700 year period at the end of which he would return and, by then,
"materialistic tendencies will be automatically transmuted into spiritual
longing, and the feeling of equality in spiritual brotherhood will pre-
vail" (Final Declaration, 1954; in Kalchuri, Vols. 13 & 14, 1998:
4547). Meher Baba also said that he (like Kṛṣṇa) is born age after age
(ibid.). To his disciples, he is Kalkin.

[122] One of the most recent examples is the movement of the followers of

Kalki Bhagavan (considered to be Kalkin). The new age is said to have started in 1995, but will only be fully realized in 2012 (Narayanan 1998). Two other well-known twentieth century Indian spiritual teachers associated by their disciples with the beginning of a new age are Swami Sivananda (1887-1963) (see Gyan 1980:167) and Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) (see Ganguly 1996:37).

[123] This, of course, is true of most millenarian movements.

[124] Note, however, that a booklet describing the 1989 centenary celebration of the birth of the founder of the powerful right-wing Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, bears the title *Heralding a new Era*, while, at the other end of the political spectrum, the official publication of the Maharashtra Council of the Communist Party of India had been named, since 1954, *Yugantara*, "The New Age." Similarly, the monthly *Bhavan's Journal*, in a 1977 issue, put the Gandhian politician J. P. Narayan on its cover and ran an editorial entitled "Jayaprakashji, Messiah of a Morning Yugasandhya."

[125] So Iyer (1973:375; see also p. 39): "His [Gandhi's] political vision was ultimately based upon the classical Indian myth of *Rama Rajya*, the ideal polity, ascribed to *Satya Yuga* or *Krita Yuga*, the Golden Age..." For an attempt to explain what *rāmrāj* meant to Gandhi in practice, see Harris 1998.

[126] See Pollock 1993:273 ff, Lutgendorf 1991:371-392, and Lutgendorf 1995. See also above, Chapter 4. For the importance of the *rāmarājya/rāmrāj* theme in a peasant uprising of the early 1920s, see Pandey 1988:258-264. And for a combination of the same theme with the cult of the Kashmiri goddess Khīr Bhavānī in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see Wangu 1992:157, 160. Khīr Bhavānī is said to put an end to all hardships in the Kali Yuga.

Conclusions

Throughout the preceding chapters we have examined relevant passages from the *Mahābhārata* in an attempt to determine, as far as the evidence allows, what the relationship is between the yuga theory and the Epic. After considering the internal evidence, as well as some relevant external sources, we can conclude that the yuga theory is a relatively late addition to the poem. Therefore, attempts at explaining essential elements of the narrative based on the assumption that the Epic story was built around this theory are fallacious. I have argued that the Epic story lent itself to being incorporated into the theory for various reasons and that, conversely, certain elements of the epic story could be more easily accepted if they were justified by reading them from the perspective of the yugas.

Not only traditional Hindu readings of the Epic have taken for granted an intimate association of the yuga theory and the story of the *Mahābhārata*, so have most modern scholars, who tend to view Purāṇic and epic texts as belonging to the same cultural and religious background, and who, therefore, tend to interpret the epics based on the Purāṇas. While there is unquestionably a close connection between Purāṇic and epic literature, there are also significant differences, and it is not always easy to disengage one from the other. In the case of the yugas, it is clear that there has been a tendency on the part of scholars to superimpose the Purāṇic tradition's assumptions about the yugas and the epics onto the texts themselves, particularly when it comes to placing the great war of the Bhāratas at the beginning of the Kali Yuga.

There is, of course, also a textual reason for this, as the *Mahā-*

bhārata itself includes passages that make this connection, and it contains others that have been too easily construed as doing so. On closer inspection, however, these passages appear either to be late additions or to have a different meaning.

I will briefly summarize the main conclusions reached throughout this work, and arrange them according to two criteria: 1) the need to look carefully at the meaning of certain key terms in the Epic, and, 2) the importance of taking into consideration the historical period of both the Epic's composition and the emergence of the yuga theory. In addition, I will outline the conclusions reached in the last chapter, which deals with the later impact of the theory and its appropriation by different sectarian traditions.

The Usage of Key Terms

A major concern in the previous chapters was to try to establish what the common usage of several key terms was at the time of the Epic's composition and, therefore, within the text itself. After a careful look at the context in which many of the terms are used it is evident that the meanings of yuga, yugānta, *kali*, *kṛta*, and even Kali Yuga and Kṛta Yuga, cannot be taken for granted. More specifically, one should not assume that these terms can be interpreted through the lens of the Purāṇic theory of the yugas.

The term yuga is used with different meanings in the *Mahābhārata*, the earliest of which is probably an unspecified long period of time.[1] It is also used in a somewhat more restricted sense to indicate a cycle of creation and destruction, and, as it acquires an even more technical connotation, it is employed to refer to each one of the four cosmic yugas. These four yugas taken together make up a larger cycle that is, itself, also called a yuga. Similarly, the compound word yugānta, the end of the yuga, usually means 'the end of the world' in a vague, general way, much in the manner that the English expression does. In the Epic, yugānta is often synonymous with what would later be called kalpānta, the end of the kalpa, the time when the entire universe is destroyed; but it is by no means clear that when yugānta is mentioned the existence of a chronologically defined cycle is to

be assumed. Significantly, yugānta is very rarely used in the Epic to refer to the end of any particular yuga, such as Tretā or Dvāpara.

There is a somewhat different, and more precisely defined, use of yugānta in Book Three, during Yudhiṣṭhira's conversation with Mārkaṇḍeya. In this case, yugānta is clearly the end of the four yugas and, most importantly, it refers not to a cosmic catastrophe, but to a social and religious one. The yugānta is here a period when the brahmanical rules of dharma are not followed and the orderly functioning of society is threatened by different forces. This section is a reflection of the concerns of the brahmanical establishment at a difficult time in its history, and it appears to have been grafted onto the Epic without much regard for whether or not it would be consistent with the narrative.

As for *kali*, this term has a special importance in the *Mahābhārata*. Its primary meaning in the Epic has nothing to do with the yugas but, instead, refers to misfortune, conflict, the worst of something, the losing dice throw, and even destruction. Its opposite, *kṛta*, predictably means good luck, the best of something, and the winning throw. All of these meanings for both terms are confirmed by the Buddhist Pali Canon, which belongs in approximately the same historical period as the composition of the *Mahābhārata*: the last centuries B.C.E. and the early centuries C.E.

We have seen how these meanings of *kali* are relevant to the Epic, to the extent that, in a sense, *kali* defines the poem. In fact, it is probably precisely because the term *kali* was such an adequate adjective for the Epic that it was only natural to consider the time when the story took place to have been a *kali* time, that is, a '*kali* yuga.' By opposition, any idealized perfect time can be described as a *kṛta* period, a '*kṛta* yuga.' A *kali* yuga is a time of strife, while a *kṛta* yuga is one of prosperity. Whereas at the time of the confrontation described in the Epic there was *kali* all around, which is to say there was serious conflict, dissension, and strife; by contrast, some years earlier, during Bhīṣma's regency, a *kṛta* atmosphere had prevailed even in the outlying areas of the kingdom, prompting the poet to refer to that period as a '*kṛta* yuga.' Even in the passages that maintain that the king creates

the yuga by his behavior—and these sections mention all four yugas—this statement should be understood primarily as a metaphor.

There are, to be sure, references to the yuga theory in the Epic, but it must be borne in mind that the theory was at a formative stage at the time of the poem's composition. It is, for the most part, in the later strata of the poem that the yuga theory appears, and its appearance is closely connected with the Vaiṣṇava appropriation of the poem, an appropriation that was accomplished largely via the doctrine of *avatāras*, which, in turn, became closely related to the yuga theory. The plot of the *Mahābhārata* was not informed by the yuga theory; the evidence suggests that the theory of the yugas was only later, and probably gradually, incorporated into the Epic. It is also possible that the theory developed, to a large extent, within the body of the poem. The process of assimilation was made easier by the fact that the destructive power of time played such an important part in the poem; if time was to blame for the tragic events portrayed in the Epic, it was an easy transition to place the blame on the emerging theory of yugas for, after all, the yugas are one of time's specific manifestations.

Once the *Mahābhārata* and the yuga theory were connected, they reinforced each other and were later seen as inseparable. The yuga theory not only became important to the Epic but it also became a permanent feature of Hinduism, for which the idea that the world is immersed in the Kali Yuga would become the focal point of the system of cosmic ages and would play a major role. The prominent status attained by the yuga theory in Hinduism was, to a large extent, due to its connection with the poem. Conversely, some aspects of the theory were probably strongly influenced by the Epic, such as the descending numerical sequence of the yugas that is based on the dice throws, which play such a crucial role in the Epic. We know there were other numerical arrangements associated with the yugas, such as the decimal one used by the *Yuga Purāṇa*; however, the sequence based on the dice throws was to become the one sanctioned by brahmanic authority in the Purāṇas and the Dharma Śāstras.

As for placing the action at the beginning of the Kali Yuga, we have established that the internal evidence for this is, at best, weak and meager. The few references that do so are probably late, and are either part of the Vaiṣṇava appropriation of the text, or they reflect a later need to account for the perceived unacceptable behavior of the epic heroes.

The Historical Context

Another concern of this work has been an attempt to understand how some aspects of the historical period in which the yuga theory and the *Mahābhārata* took shape influenced their formation.

In general terms, much of the new religious thought of the time centered around the transitory nature of worldly existence, and the inevitability of death. This, in turn, painted a picture of the world as a place of suffering and hardship, a place of bondage from which one sought to be freed by one method or another. For the nascent Buddhism, the depiction of the world as a place of suffering was of central importance, but such a portrayal was also strongly present in brahmanical circles, as is made clear by some Upaniṣads and the foundational texts of the classical systems of Yoga and Sāṃkhya.[2] The irresistible power of time as the main agent of both human and cosmic destruction played a major role in these ideas. It is, therefore, not surprising that different systems of cosmogony should arise at this time proclaiming that humanity was at a low point in its history. Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism would all agree on this, although the specifics would vary from one system to another. The idea of a *kali* yuga, a *kali* period in history, could easily be accepted.

But for the brahmanical establishment there were also other concerns that went beyond a reflection on the nature of human existence and the role played in it by suffering and death. There were also more pragmatic worries, as it was not only from a religious or even a philosophical perspective that the times were bad. There were important social changes taking place that threatened the status of the brahmanical establishment, its social institutions, its ritual tradition, and its mythology. Late Vedic litera-

ture already shows signs of disappointment with the condition of Vedic learning, and some texts complain about the degraded state of society and the impossibility of following dharma in the same way the ancient sages did.[3]

Against this background, the invasions of obviously non-brahmanical foreign rulers and the alarming growth of non-brahmanical movements seemed to portend a crisis of eschatological proportions. They appeared to signal the end of the rule of brahmanical dharma, with its social structure determined by *varṇa* and *āśrama*. It is in descriptions of this 'end of the (brahmanical social and moral) world,' that the term yugānta, as found in the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the *Mahābhārata*, is used with a meaning that differs from the one it carries in the rest of the Epic. We must also bear in mind that the Epic story is used as a vehicle for promoting the need to uphold dharma and have a properly functioning dharmic society.

After the *Mahābhārata*

The idea of a gradually decaying society found a more precise expression in the theory of the yugas. If the Kali Yuga became the perfect image for explaining the decadent present while ideal earlier times were embodied in descriptions of the Kṛta Yuga, the fourfold sequence of the dice throws added precision by including two intermediate stages between Kṛta and Kali, namely Tretā and Dvāpara. The result is a numerical descending scale that goes from best to worst.

This later developed into the idea that a different dharma is best suited for each yuga, requiring a progressively diminishing effort in accordance with the correspondingly diminished capacities of people. The idea of a clearly determined yuga dharma, a concept that is largely absent from the Epic, gained importance in the post-epic period as a means of legitimizing the contrast between current and ancient, particularly Vedic, customs and practices. In the following centuries, yuga dharma would also become a powerful sectarian tool for asserting the superiority of a particular religious path, be it a certain form of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism,

Goddess worship, Tantrism, or even a non-brahmanical movement.

There is a further element that has largely escaped notice, but which is important for understanding the role the yuga theory plays in the Epic, particularly in the Mārkaṇḍeya section. That is the possibility that the crisis faced by the brahmanical establishment in the last centuries B.C.E. and the early centuries C.E. was interpreted, by that same establishment, as being caused by the approaching end of a cycle of four yugas and, consequently, constituted a sign of the imminent arrival of a new Kṛta Yuga. However, as time passed and it became evident that a golden age of dharma was not beginning, these hopeful expectations faded and the arrival of the golden age was pushed far into the distant future. [4] In its place, the overpowering presence of the Kali Yuga was generally acknowledged and it became, as stated above, a fundamental tenet of Hindu tradition.

The bleak prospect of living in a dark yuga was sometimes partially countered by positing the Kali Yuga as the best yuga because it allowed easier access to spiritual liberation, or by saying that its negative influences could be neutralized under certain circumstances. In the twentieth century, however, many attempts were made to put aside the Purāṇic chronology of the yugas or to reinterpret it in order to announce the arrival of a new Kṛta Yuga, thus effectively re-activating the hopeful expectations evinced in the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the *Mahābhārata*. The yuga theory remains a current and vital element of many modern Hindu movements, and it also holds a prominent place among today's millenarian and New Age expectations worldwide.

Notes

[1] I am here only concerned with the meanings of yuga that have to do with time. The term also has other definitions.

[2] The well-known Buddhist expression that everything is suffering or pain, *duḥkha*, requires no further comment. The term *duḥkha* is used with similar intentions in the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali (2.15–16), and in Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* (1). For the Upaniṣads, see especially the

Maitrāyaṇīya 1.3-4; the earlier *Chāndogya* (7.1.3) uses the equivalent term *śoka.*

3 Olivelle (1993:255, note 49) points to three significant textual references in this regard: Yāska's *Nirukta* (1.20), the Dharma Sūtra of Gautama (1.3), and that of Āpastamba (2.13.7-9). These passages make no mention of the yugas.

4 Not unlike what happened in early Christianity, within the gospels themselves. The second coming of Jesus and the consequent arrival of the kingdom of God, which were supposed to be imminent after his death, were reinterpreted and postponed until an unspecified later time as soon as it became clear that they would not happen in the lifetime of his direct disciples. See Fredriksen 1988, Chapter 9, "Between the Resurrection and the Parousia."

Appendix A

Description of the Yugas in the Section on Cosmology

Mahābhārata 6.11.1–14

Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks:

1. [Tell me] bard, about the duration of life, and about the good and bad rewards in this land of the Bhāratas, as well as in [the land of] Haimavat.

2. Tell me in detail about the future, the past, and the present, Saṃjaya; also tell me about [the land called] Harivarṣa.

Saṃjaya replies:

3. In the land of the Bhāratas there are four yugas, best of the Bhāratas: Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Puṣya (Kali), O strengthener of the Kurus!

4. The first yuga is called Kṛta, then [comes] the Tretā Yuga, King; when the Dvāpara wanes, Puṣya begins.

5. Four thousand years, best of the Kurus, is the calculated length of life in the Kṛta Yuga, O best of kings!

6. Then, three thousand in Tretā, King, and two thousand in Dvāpara, with one hundred being the case now.[1]

7. There is no established length for life in this Puṣya, best of the Bhāratas, here people [even] die in the womb or at birth.

8. Very strong and noble people, endowed with the quality of procreation, were born in Kṛta, King, as were great ascetic sages.

9. People of great energy, magnanimous, followers of dharma, truthful, were born in the Kṛta Yuga, King, and wealthy and handsome people.

10. Long-lived, heroic, brave *kṣatriyas* are born in Tretā; they are the best of archers in battle, they are universal monarchs.

11. People of every cast are born during Dvāpara, great King, they have great energy, are very brave, and they are ready to kill each other.

12. Irascible men of little vigor, King, are born in Puṣya, they are greedy and they are liars, Bhārata!

13. Envy, conceit, anger, deceit, and calumny become [characteristic] of human beings in Puṣya; so do passion and greed, O Bhārata!

14. This is the trailing end, King, of this Dvāpara,[2] O ruler of men! Haimavat is superior [to Bhāratavarṣa] in [terms of] qualities; Harivarṣa is [even] better than that (Haimavat).

Sanskrit Text

dhṛtarāṣṭra uvāca /

1. bhāratasyāsya varṣasya tathā haimavatasya ca /
pramāṇam āyuṣaḥ sūta phalaṃ cāpi śubhāśubham //

2. āgatam atikrāntaṃ vartamānaṃ ca saṃjaya /
ācakṣva me vistareṇa harivarṣaṃ tathaiva ca //

saṃjaya uvāca /

3. catvāri bhārate varṣe yugāni bharatarṣabha /
kṛtaṃ tretā dvāparaṃ ca puṣyaṃ ca kuruvardhana //

4. pūrvaṃ kṛtayugaṃ nāma tatas tretāyugaṃ vibho /
saṃkṣepād dvāparasyātha tataḥ puṣyaṃ pravartate //

5. catvāri ca sahasrāṇi varṣāṇāṃ kurusattama /
āyuḥsaṃkhyā kṛtayuge saṃkhyātā rājasattama //

6. tathā trīṇi sahasrāṇi tretāyāṃ manujādhipa /
dvisahasraṃ dvāpare tu śate tiṣṭhati samprati //

7. na pramāṇasthitir hyasti puṣye 'smin bharatarṣabha /
garbhasthāś ca mriyante 'tra tathā jātā mriyanti ca //

8. mahābalā mahāsattvāḥ prajāguṇasamanvitāḥ /
ajāyanta kṛte rājan munayaḥ sutapodhanāḥ //

9. mahotsāhā mahātmāno dhārmikāḥ satyavādinaḥ /
jātāḥ kṛtayuge rājan dhaninaḥ priyadarśanāḥ //

10. āyuṣmanto mahāvīrā dhanurdharavarā yudhi /
jāyante kṣatriyāḥ śūrās tretāyāṃ cakravartinaḥ //

11. sarvavarṇā mahārāja jāyante dvāpare sati /
mahotsāhā mahāvīryāḥ parasparavadhaiṣiṇaḥ //

12. tejasālpena saṃyuktāḥ krodhanāḥ puruṣā nṛpa /
lubdhāś cānṛtakāś caiva puṣye jāyanti bhārata //

13. īrṣyā mānas tathā krodho māyāsūyā tathaiva ca /
puṣye bhavanti martyānāṃ rāgo lobhaś ca bhārata //

14. saṃkṣepo vartate rājan dvāpare 'smin narādhipa /
guṇottaraṃ haimavataṃ harivarṣaṃ tataḥ param //

Notes

[1] "One hundred being the case now," *śate tiṣṭhati samprati.* One would expect one thousand instead of one hundred, but, either way, this poses a problem, as the next verse says there is no fixed life-span in Puṣya. The only way to make good sense of this statement would be to interpret *śata* simply as 'many,' although this is still only a partial solution, as the next verse seems to imply that life in Puṣya tends to be short, rather than long. In any case, these two verses (6 & 7) place the conversation in the Kali Yuga, in clear contradiction to verse 14, which places the action in the final moments of the Dvāpara. An alternate reading for *śate tiṣṭhati samprati* in verse 6 is *bhuvi tiṣṭhanti sāmpratam,* "people live on earth now," thus turning the verse into: "Then, three thousand in Tretā, King, while now, in the Dvāpara, people live on earth for two thousand." This would agree with verse 14 in placing the action in Dvāpara, but it now contradicts verse 7, which talks of "this

Puṣya," *puṣye 'smin*. The contradiction between verses 6 (& 7) and 14 has no obvious solution. It was even noted by the editor of the CE (7:764), who, in an attempt to clarify the matter, confused it further by seemingly taking the statement in verse 6 that Kali was already underway as more authoritative than verse 14's assertion that it was still the Dvāpara. He suggests that the only way to avoid the contradiction is to accept the suggestion (no source given) that, in verse 14, *asmin*, "this," does not refer to Dvāpara, but should, instead, be taken as *īrṣyāmānādiviṣaye*, "with respect to envy, conceit and so on." In other words, "this" would refer back to the list of negative qualities of the Puṣya/Kali Yuga in the preceding verse (13). But then *dvāpare*, "in Dvāpara," (in verse 14) would be left hanging by itself. In addition, we must remember that Dhṛtarāṣṭra's question is about the past, the present, and the future; so if the action is placed in Kali, Saṃjaya's reply would be incomplete, as he would then be leaving out any reference to the future. It is clear, in any case, that this chapter, as it stands, contradicts itself by placing the action in both the Dvāpara and the Puṣya/Kali Yugas.

[2] "The trailing end," *saṃkṣepa*; literally, "contraction," "compression." The term was also used, again with reference to the Dvāpara Yuga, in verse 4.

Appendix B

Conversation between Bhīma and Hanumān Concerning the Yugas

Mahābhārata 3.148.5–37

Bhīma asks to see the form Hanumān displayed when he jumped across the ocean. The monkey god laughs, and replies:

5. You cannot see that form; neither can anyone else. It was a different time-period then, which is no longer.[1]

6. Times are different in the Kṛta Yuga, in the Tretā, and in the Dvāpara.[2] This is a time of decay; I no longer have that form.

7. The earth, rivers, trees and mountains; siddhas, gods and great seers, all conform to time, according to the conditions in each yuga. For strength, size, and power, wax and wane.

8. Stop [asking] to see that form, son of the Kuru family. I also conform to the yuga, for time is unconquerable.[3]

Bhīma said:

9. Enumerate the yugas and [describe] the proper conduct in each yuga. Tell me about the modes of dharma, desire (*kāma*), and profit (*artha*); about size, courage, and life and death [in each yuga].

Hanumān said:

10. Kṛta is the name of the yuga, dear one, in which dharma is

eternal. [Everything is] done (*kṛta*), and there is nothing left to be done (*kartavya*) at that time,[4] in that supreme yuga.

11. Dharmas do not decay then, nor do creatures waste away. Therefore, it is called Kṛta Yuga, which in time became identified with excellence.[5]

12. In the Kṛta Yuga there are no gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas* or snakes, dear one; and no buying or selling.

13. There were no Sāman, Yajus or Ṛc sounds. There was no human labor; fruits were obtained [merely] by wishing for them, and renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) was the only dharma.

14. During that yuga there was no disease, no weakening of the senses, no calumny, no crying, no arrogance, and no slander;

15. No quarreling, no laziness, no hatred, no cheating, no fear, no suffering, no envy, and no selfishness.

16. Therefore, the highest *brahman*, the supreme goal of yogis, was the soul of all beings (i.e. attainable to all); and Nārāyaṇa was white then.

17. *Brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras* had clearly defined characteristics. In the Kṛta Yuga, all creatures were engaged in their proper work.

18. The stages of life (*āśramas*), conduct, knowledge, intelligence, and strength were all appropriate [to each caste]. The castes performed appropriate actions then, and they attained [their] dharmas.

19. They used one Veda, they had one set of mantras, injunctions and modes of practice. They had different characteristics (dharmas), but, having the same Veda, they followed one dharma.

20. They reached the supreme goal by acting according to the four stages of life determined by time; and through gaining fruits without desire.

21. Dharma was well defined, it was characterized by the practice of *ātma-yoga*. In the Kṛta Yuga, the dharma of the four castes is fourfold (i.e. complete), and it is eternal.

22. This is called the Kṛta Yuga, from which the three qualities (*guṇas*) are absent. Now learn about the Tretā, in which the sacrificial session (*satra*) appears.

23. Dharma is diminished by one quarter, and Acyuta (Kṛṣṇa) becomes red. Men are truthful and devoted to the dharma of [ritual] acts.[6]

24. Then sacrifices (*yajñas*) appear, as do different kinds of dharmas and rituals (*kriyās*). In Tretā, these have specific purposes; people gain rewards through rituals and giving/charity.

25. People in the Tretā Yuga do not stray from dharma. They are devoted to austerities and to giving, they follow their own dharma and perform rituals the right way.

26. In the Dvāpara Yuga, dharma is lessened by half. Viṣṇu becomes yellow, and the Veda is divided into four parts.

27. Some people [know] four Vedas, others three, two, or one; some don't even know the *Ṛg* (Veda).

28. With the *Śāstras* (texts) thus divided, ritual is also divided [into differing rituals]. Devoted to austerities and giving, people are influenced by [the *guṇa*] *rajas*.

29. Out of lack of knowledge of the one Veda, the Vedas become many. Due to the decline of [regard for] truth, there are now only some who abide by it.

30. Many diseases befall those who lapse from truth. Lust and calamities occur then, caused by destiny.

31. Greatly afflicted by them, some people practice austerities. Others perform sacrifices, wishing to obtain earthly goods or heaven.

32. In this way, when the Dvāpara arrives, creatures are destroyed because of adharma. In the Kali Yuga, Kaunteya, only a fourth part of dharma remains.

33. When the dark/tamasic (*tāmasa*) yuga arrives, Keśava (Kṛṣṇa) becomes black (*kṛṣṇa*).[7] Vedic practices decline, as do dharma and the practice of sacrifice.

34. There are natural disasters, diseases, laziness, bad qualities

such as anger and the like, calamities, and mental as well as physical suffering.

35. With the succession of yugas, dharma deteriorates; with the deterioration of dharma, the world also deteriorates.

36. When the world is in a state of decay, the conditions that allow for its advancement are destroyed. The religious practices (dharmas) performed at the end of the yuga produce opposite results.[8]

37. Such is the yuga called Kali, which will soon begin. Even the immortals conform to the yuga. [9]

Sanskrit Text

5. na tac chakyaṃ tvayā draṣṭuṃ rūpaṃ nānyena kenacit /
kālāvasthā tadā hy anyā vartate sā na sāṃpratam //

6. anyaḥ kṛtayuge kālas tretāyāṃ dvāpare 'paraḥ /
ayaṃ pradhvaṃsanaḥ kālo nādya tad rūpam asti me //

7. bhūmir nadyo nagāḥ śailāḥ siddhā devā maharṣayaḥ /
kālaṃ samanuvartante yathā bhāvā yuge yuge /
balavarṣmaprabhāvā hi prahīyanty udbhavanti ca //

8. tad alaṃ tava tad rūpaṃ draṣṭuṃ kurukulodvaha /
yugaṃ samanuvartāmi kālo hi duratikramaḥ //

bhīma uvāca /

9. yugasaṃkhyāṃ samācakṣva ācāraṃ ca yuge yuge /
dharmakāmārthabhāvāṃś ca varṣma vīryaṃ bhavābhavau //

hanūmān uvāca /

10. kṛtaṃ nāma yugaṃ tāta yatra dharmaḥ sanātanaḥ /
kṛtam eva na kartavyaṃ tasmin kāle yugottame //

11. na tatra dharmāḥ sīdanti na kṣīyante ca vai prajāḥ /
tataḥ kṛtayugaṃ nāma kālena guṇatāṃ gatam //

12. devadānavagandharvayakṣarākṣasapannagāḥ /
nāsan kṛtayuge tāta tadā na krayavikrayāḥ //

13. na sāmayajurgvarṇāḥ kriyā nāsīc ca mānavī /

abhidhyāya phalaṃ tatra dharmaḥ saṃnyāsa eva ca //

14. na tasmin yugasaṃsarge vyādhayo nendriyakṣayaḥ /
nāsūyā nāpi ruditaṃ na darpo nāpi paiśunam //

15. na vigrahaḥ kutas tandrī na dveṣo nāpi vaikṛtam /
na bhayaṃ na ca saṃtāpo na cerṣyā na ca matsaraḥ //

16. tataḥ paramakaṃ brahma yā gatir yogināṃ parā /
ātmā ca sarvabhūtānāṃ śuklo nārāyaṇas tadā //

17. brāhmaṇāḥ kṣatriyā vaiśyāḥ śūdrāḥ ca kṛtalakṣaṇāḥ /
kṛte yuge samabhavan svakarmaniratāḥ prajāḥ //

18. samāśramaṃ samācāraṃ samajñānamatībalam /
tadā hi samakarmāṇo varṇā dharmān avāpnuvan //

19. ekavedasamāyuktā ekamantravidhikriyāḥ /
pṛthagdharmās tv ekavedā dharmam ekam anuvratāḥ //

20. cāturāśramyayuktena karmaṇā kālayoginā /
akāmaphalasaṃyogāt prāpnuvanti parāṃ gatim //

21. ātmayogasamāyukto dharmo 'yaṃ kṛtalakṣaṇaḥ /
kṛte yuge catuṣpādaś cāturvarṇyasya śāśvataḥ //

22. etat kṛtayugaṃ nāma traiguṇyaparivarjitam /
tretām api nibodha tvaṃ yasmin satraṃ pravartate //

23. pādena hrasate dharmo raktatāṃ yāti cācyutaḥ /
satyapravṛttāś ca narāḥ kriyādharmaparāyaṇāḥ //

24. tato yajñāḥ pravartante dharmāś ca vividhāḥ kriyāḥ /
tretāyāṃ bhāvasaṃkalpāḥ kriyādānaphalodayāḥ //

25. pracalanti na vai dharmāt tapodānaparāyaṇāḥ /
svadharmasthāḥ kriyāvanto janās tretāyuge 'bhavan //

26. dvāpare 'pi yuge dharmo dvibhāgonaḥ pravartate /
viṣṇur vai pītatāṃ yāti caturdhā veda eva ca //

27. tato 'nye ca caturvedās trivedāś ca tathāpare /
dvivedāś caikavedāś cāpy anṛcaś ca tathāpare //

28. evaṃ śāstreṣu bhinneṣu bahudhā nīyate kriyā /
tapodānapravṛttā ca rājasī bhavati prajā //

29. ekavedasya cājñānād vedās te bahavaḥ kṛtāḥ /
satyasya ceha vibhraṃśāt satye kaścid avasthitaḥ //

30. satyāt pracyavamānānāṃ vyādhayo bahavo 'bhavan /
kāmāś copadravāś caiva tadā daivatakāritāḥ //

31. yair ardyamānāḥ subhṛśaṃ tapas tapyanti mānavāḥ /
kāmakāmāḥ svargakāmā yajñāṃs tanvanti cāpare //

32. evaṃ dvāparam āsādya prajāḥ kṣīyanty adharmataḥ /
pādenaikena kaunteya dharmaḥ kaliyuge sthitaḥ //

33. tāmasaṃ yugam āsādya kṛṣṇo bhavati keśavaḥ /
vedācārāḥ praśāmyanti dharmayajñakriyās tathā //

34. ītayo vyādhayas tandrī doṣāḥ krodhādayas tathā /
upadravāś ca vartante ādhayo vyādhayas tathā //

35. yugeṣv āvartamāneṣu dharmo vyāvartate punaḥ /
dharme vyāvartamāne tu loko vyāvartate punaḥ //

36. loke kṣīṇe kṣayaṃ yānti bhāvā lokapravartakāḥ /
yugakṣayakṛtā dharmāḥ prārthanāni vikurvate //

37. etat kaliyugaṃ nāma acirād yat pravartate /
yugānuvartanaṃ tv etat kurvanti cirajīvinaḥ //

Notes

[1] Or: "The conditions of the times were different then, they are not like that now," *kālāvasthā tadā hy anyā vartate sā na sāmpratam.*

[2] "Times are different," literally: "time is different."

[3] Or: "I also conform to the yuga, and I cannot go beyond the limits set by time."

[4] Or: "[Everything is] complete/perfect, and does not require to be completed/perfected," *kṛtam eva na kartavyam.* This play on words is clearly an attempt to apply the etymology of *kṛta* (made, done, perfected) to the description of the Kṛta Yuga. The poet seems here to be distancing himself from the dice-related origin of the terms. We could, perhaps, consider this as reflecting a stage in the evolution of the yuga system when the names of the yugas are already standing on their own, and all connection to the dice throws is forgotten or, at least, ignored.

5 "...which in time became identified with excellence," *kālena guṇatāṃ gatam*. This expression is not entirely clear; according to Nīlakaṇṭha, *guṇatā* should be taken in the sense of subordination, thus turning the phrase into: "which in time came to be subordinate," but subordinate to what? Perhaps the intended meaning is: "which in time wore out."

6 Or: "Men are truthful and devoted to [ritual] acts and dharma."

7 The use of *tāmasa* is surely intended as a play on words; it means dark, thus allowing for the comparison to Keśava's color, but it also means tamasic, that is, related to the *guṇa tamas*. Similarly, in verse 28, the people of the Dvāpara Yuga are said to be influenced by *rajas*, which can be taken simply as passion/emotion, or as the name of the *guṇa*. No *guṇa* is specified for Tretā, but one would assume it to be *sattva*, the only remaining one. The Kṛta Yuga is said to be beyond the three *guṇas* (verse 22).

8 "The religious practices (dharmas) performed at the end of the yuga," *yugakṣayakṛtā dharmāḥ*; note that *yugakṣaya* is not used in the locative (*yugakṣaye*), as when it is used in a formulaic way to refer to the end of the world.

9 The immortals: *cirajīvinaḥ*; literally, those who live long. In this case, those who live longer than one yuga, such as Hanumān himself, according to the beginning of the dialogue. According to tradition, there are seven of these immortals: Aśvatthāman, Bali (the *asura*), Vyāsa, Hanumān, Vibhīṣaṇa, Kṛpa, and Paraśurāma.

Appendix C

The Terms Puṣya, Dvāpara, Khārvā and Kṛta in the *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa*

The section of the *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* that is of interest to us deals with the two halves of the lunar cycle—the waxing and waning of the Moon—in the context of the soma sacrifice. It explains that the day before the full Moon is called Anumati, and the day after it is called Rākā. The day before the new Moon is named Sinīvālī, and the day after it Kuhū. Then follows a verse that reads:

In Puṣya, Anumati, so it should be known, but Sinīvālī in Dvāpara. In Khārvā it should be Rākā, in the Kṛta *parvan* it should be Kuhū.[1]

Sāyaṇa, the fourteenth century commentator of Vedic texts, explains the verse as follows:

'In Puṣya' means in the one in which adharma prospers/increases (*puṣyati*) quickly. The meaning is that in the Kali Yuga Anumati should be known to be superior/the most auspicious. In Dvāpara, Sinīvālī is superior. 'In Khārvā' means in the Tretā, in which dharma and adharma are equally imperfect (*kharva*); in it Rākā should be superior. 'Kuhū in the Kṛta *parvan*' means in the *parvan* related to the Kṛta Yuga.[2]

And this is Bollée's translation, obviously based on Sāyaṇa's commentary:

In the Kaliyuga Anumati is to be considered (as the principal),
in the Dvāparayuga Sinīvālī, in the Tretayuga (sic) Rākā must be
the principal, in the Kṛtayuga Kuhū.[3]

Note that Bollée not only accepts Sāyaṇa's interpretation uncriti-
cally—he neither quotes nor mentions the commentator—he even
substitutes Kali for Puṣya, Tretā for Khārvā, and yuga for *parvan*,
without ever mentioning the original terms.

Now, we can infer from Kṛta's designation as a *parvan* that
Puṣya, Dvāpara, and Khārvā are also *parvans*. It is true that *par-
van* can mean a period of time, but it is also true that, when it
does, it refers especially to the changes of the Moon, or to festi-
vals celebrated on such days. And this section of the Brāhmaṇa is
dealing precisely with the days in which the Moon changes, so to
suddenly assume that *parvan* is here a synonym of yuga, instead
of meaning a day in the Moon's cycle, seems like too big a leap
to take.

The sense of this verse is by no means clear, but even if we
wanted to see in it a reference to some kind of longer time-peri-
ods, there is no way of knowing how they should be understood.
To assume, as Sāyaṇa has done (followed by Bollée and others),
that this verse refers to the classical yugas, is unwarranted.

His opinion was probably influenced by the fact that Puṣya
does appear in the *Mahābhārata* as a name for the fourth yuga.
Unfortunately, the Epic is no evidence for the Brāhmaṇa, as the
use of the term there is limited, maybe later, and probably of ex-
ternal origin. In fact, it is possible that the Epic use of Puṣya for
Kali was influenced by the Brāhmaṇa, whether because someone
understood this verse as a reference to the yugas, or simply be-
cause of the similarity between the names in the Brāhmaṇa and
the names of the yugas.

There is no other textual evidence that I am aware of for
Khārvā being a name of the Tretā Yuga, nor, for that matter, of
parvan being synonymous with yuga. As for Sāyaṇa's explanation
of the terms Puṣya and Khārvā as names for the Kali and Tretā
yugas—regardless of whether they have that sense here or not—
his ingenious rationalization that Puṣya, a term implying ex-

cellence, refers to the terrible Kali Yuga because in Kali adharma attains prominence, seems like stretching the interpretation too far. Even less convincing is his explanation that Khārvā (from *kharva*, imperfect, mutilated) stands for the Tretā Yuga because in it dharma and adharma are equally imperfect. By such logic, Khārvā would have to be Dvāpara, not Tretā, as it is in the Dvāpara Yuga that dharma has two out of the four parts of dharma, whereas in Tretā it has three fourths, leaving out only one fourth that could be filled by adharma.

With regard to the use of the terms in the Brāhmaṇa verse, one could just as well say that Khārvā is a term related to Rākā, the full Moon (or the day after the full Moon), because the Moon then starts being mutilated as it diminishes towards the new Moon. By the same token, Kṛta, which means complete or perfect, could designate the new Moon (or the day following it) because the Moon then commences to increase towards fullness.

Likewise, Anumati, the day preceding the full Moon, could be associated with Puṣya, which stands for excellence, because this is a particularly auspicious day for offering oblations to the gods or the ancestors. It is more difficult to explain the connection between Dvāpara and Sinīvālī, the day before the new Moon, but it could have to do with this day's inauspicious nature, something that Dvāpara, as the name of a dice throw, could indicate. It must also be remembered that Anumati, Rākā, Sinīvālī, and Kuhū are not merely the names of these days in the lunar cycle, they are also the names of the divinities presiding over them. So, in this verse, it is even possible that the names refer to the divinities.

On the other hand, there might be some significance to the fact that this is a *śloka* verse, whereas the Brāhmaṇa is composed in prose. This could suggest that the verse is a latter interpolation, or a quote, although the text gives no indication that it is quoting from another source.

In any case, the point I wish to make is that the meaning of this verse is not clear, and that interpreting it as a reference to the classical yugas, as Sāyaṇa did in the fourteenth century, could

well be another instance of reading later, Purāṇic ideas into a text composed when the yuga theory was at a very incipient stage of development, if it indeed existed at all.

Notes

[1] *puṣye cānumatir jñeyā sinīvālī tu dvāpare / khārvāyāṃ tu bhaved rākā kṛta-parve kuhūr bhavet //* 5.6.5 (4.6.5 in Bollée's edition).

[2] *puṣye / puṣyaty asmin adharmaḥ śīghram iti puṣye kaliyuge anumatiḥ śreṣṭheti jñeyā / tathā dvāpare sinīvālī śreṣṭhā / khārvāyām / kharvau samau dharmādharmau yasyāṃ tretāyāṃ sā khārvā / tasyāṃ rākā śreṣṭhā bhavet / tathā kuhūḥ kṛtaparve kṛtayugasambandhi parva / [tasmin] bhaved iti //*

[3] Bollée, 1956:102.

Appendix D

The King and Punitive Justice

Mahābhārata 12.70

Yudhiṣṭhira asks:

1. Tell me grandfather, what are the possible outcomes depending on how the king applies punitive justice (*daṇḍanīti*)?[1]

Bhīṣma replies:

2. Listen King, as I duly describe the excellence of punitive justice with true and fitting words, O Bhārata!

3. Punitive justice regulates the [social system of the] four *varṇas*, according to their respective dharmas. When well administered by a ruler, it keeps [the subjects] away from a-dharma.[2]

4. When the four *varṇas* are well established in their own dharma, and there is no confusion as to the boundaries of each *varṇa*; when punitive justice brings prosperity and everyone is free from danger;

5. When the three [upper] *varṇas* perform their own duties as prescribed, then gods and men reach happiness. You must know this![3]

6. As to whether the time [-period] determines the king [to act in a certain way], or the king [by the quality of his actions] determines the time; have no doubt, the king determines the time.

7. When a king relies totally and completely on punitive justice, then the best of times, the Kṛta Yuga, prevails.[4]

8. In the Kṛta Yuga dharma prevails and there is no adharma. The hearts of those from every *varṇa* find no pleasure in a-dharma.

9. The property of all the people is secure, there is no question about this, and Vedic [ritual] actions are effective.

10. All the seasons are pleasant and healthy; and the voices, words and minds of men are pure.

11. There are no diseases then, and no man lives a short life. There are no widows, and no cruel man is born.

12. The earth yields crops without being tilled, and, likewise, plants [grow by themselves]. Bark, leaves, fruits and roots are effective.[5]

13. There is no adharma then, only dharma. These, Yudhiṣṭhira, are the qualities of the Kṛta Yuga.

14. When the king pursues three parts of punitive justice and abandons a fourth part, it is the Tretā.

15. This fourth part is made out of misfortune, and it accompanies the other three parts.[6] The earth yields crops only when tilled, and only plants [grow by themselves].[7]

16. When the king abandons half of punitive justice and pursues half, then begins the time called Dvāpara.

17. Then a half is made out of misfortune, and it accompanies the [remaining] two parts. The earth yields crops only when tilled, and, even then, the fruits are scarce.

18. When the king abandons punitive justice completely, and vigorously oppresses the people, then Kali begins.

19. In Kali adharma predominates, and there is very little dharma. The minds of the members of every *varṇa* lapse from their own dharma.

20. *Śūdras* make their living by begging, and *brāhmaṇas* by serving [others]. Property is no longer secure, and the *varṇas*

intermingle.

21. Vedic [ritual] actions are not effective, and all the seasons are unpleasant and unhealthy.

22. The voices, words and minds of the people lose their purity. There are diseases then, and people die young.

23. There are widows, and cruel people are born. Parjanya (the rain god) rains sporadically, and crops appear sporadically.

24. All pleasures disappear when the king is not willing to protect the people properly by intently administering punitive justice.

25. The king brings about the Kṛta Yuga, the Tretā and the Dvāpara. The king is the cause of the fourth yuga.

26. By bringing about the Kṛta, the king enjoys heaven forever; by bringing about the Tretā he enjoys heaven, but not forever.

27. By establishing the Dvāpara, he enjoys it in due proportion. By establishing the Kali, the king incurs great sin.

28. So an evil king lives in hell eternally. Immersed in the sins of the people, he meets with disgrace and sin.[8]

29. While respecting punitive justice, a discerning *kṣatriya* should always obtain what he does not yet have, and preserve what he has acquired.

30. When well administered, punitive justice promotes the well-being of the world, and it establishes the boundaries of proper conduct, just like a mother or a father.

31. All beings depend on it; know this, bull of the Bhāratas! This is the supreme dharma: that the king should exercise punitive justice.

32. Therefore, descendant of Kuru, apply punitive justice and protect the people according to dharma. By protecting the people in this way, you will conquer a heaven that is difficult to attain.

Sanskrit Text

yudhiṣṭhira uvāca /

1. daṇḍanītiś ca rājā ca samastau tāv ubhāv api /
kasya kiṃ kurvataḥ siddhyai tan me brūhi pitāmaha //

bhīṣma uvāca /

2. mahābhāgyaṃ daṇḍanītyāḥ siddhaiḥ śabdaiḥ sahetukaiḥ /
śṛṇu me śaṃsato rājan yathāvad iha bhārata //

3. daṇḍanītiḥ svadharmebhyaś cāturvarṇyaṃ niyacchati /
prayuktā svāminā samyag adharmebhyaś ca yacchati //

4. cāturvarṇye svadharmasthe maryādānām asaṃkare /
daṇḍanītikṛte kṣeme prajānām akuto bhaye //

5. some prayatnaṃ kurvanti trayo varṇā yathāvidhi /
tasmād devamanuṣyāṇāṃ sukhaṃ viddhi samāhitam //

6. kālo vā kāraṇaṃ rājño rājā vā kālakāraṇam /
iti te saṃśayo mā bhūd rājā kālasya kāraṇam //

7. daṇḍanītyā yadā rājā samyak kārtsnyena vartate /
tadā kṛtayugaṃ nāma kālaḥ śreṣṭhaḥ pravartate // [9]

8. bhavet kṛtayuge dharmo nādharmo vidyate kvacit /
sarveṣām eva varṇānāṃ nādharme ramate manaḥ //

9. yogakṣemāḥ pravartante prajānāṃ nātra saṃśayaḥ /
vaidikāni ca karmāṇi bhavanty aviguṇāny uta //

10. ṛtavaś ca sukhāḥ sarve bhavanty uta nirāmayāḥ /
prasīdanti narāṇāṃ ca svaravarṇamanāṃsi ca //

11. vyādhayo na bhavanty atra nālpāyur dṛśyate naraḥ /
vidhavā na bhavanty atra nṛśaṃso nābhijāyate //

12. akṛṣṭapacyā pṛthivī bhavanty oṣadhayas tathā /
tvakpatraphalamūlāni vīryavanti bhavanti ca //

13. nādharmo vidyate tatra dharma eva tu kevalaḥ /
iti kārtayugān etān guṇān viddhi yudhiṣṭhira //

14. daṇḍanītyā yadā rājā trīn aṃśān anuvartate /
cathurtham aṃśam utsṛjya tadā tretā pravartate //

15. aśubhasya cathurthāṃśas trīn aṃśān anuvartate /
kṛṣṭapacyaiva pṛthivī bhavanty oṣadhayas tathā //

16. ardhaṃ tyaktvā yadā rājā nītyardham anuvartate /
tatas tu dvāparaṃ nāma sa kālaḥ sampravartate //

17. aśubhasya tadā ardhaṃ dvāv aṃśāv anuvartate /
kṛṣṭapacyaiva pṛthivī bhavanty alpaphalā tathā //

18. daṇḍanītiṃ parityajya yadā kārtsnyena bhūmipaḥ /
prajāḥ kliśnāty ayogena praviśyati tadā kaliḥ //

19. kalāv adharmo bhūyiṣṭhaṃ dharmo bhavati tu kvacit /
sarveṣām eva varṇānāṃ svadharmāc cyavate manaḥ //

20. śūdrā bhaikṣeṇa jīvanti brāhmaṇāḥ paricaryayā /
yogakṣemasya nāśaś ca vartate varṇasaṃkaraḥ //

21. vaidikāni ca karmāṇi bhavanti viguṇāny uta /
ṛtavo na sukhāḥ sarve bhavanty āmayinas tathā //

22. hrasanti ca manuṣyāṇāṃ svaravarṇamanāṃsy uta /
vyādhayaś ca bhavanty atra mriyante cāgatāyuṣaḥ //

23. vidhavāś ca bhavanty atra nṛśaṃsā jāyate prajā /
kvacid varṣati parjanyaḥ kvacit sasyaṃ prarohati //

24. rasāḥ sarve kṣayaṃ yānti yadā necchati bhūmipaḥ /
prajāḥ saṃrakṣituṃ samyag daṇḍanītisamāhitaḥ //

25. rājā kṛtayugasraṣṭā tretāyā dvāparasya ca /
yugasya ca caturthasya rājā bhavati kāraṇam //

26. kṛtasya karaṇād rājā svargam atyantam aśnute /
tretāyāḥ karaṇād rājā svargaṃ nātyantam aśnute // [10]

27. pravartanād dvāparasya yathābhāgam upāśnute /
kaleḥ pravartanād rājā pāpam atyantam aśnute //

28. tato vasati duṣkarmā narake śāśvatīḥ samāḥ /
prajānāṃ kalmaṣe magno 'kīrtiṃ pāpaṃ ca vindati //

29. daṇḍanītiṃ puraskṛtya vijānan kṣatriyaḥ sadā /
anavāptaṃ ca lipseta labdhaṃ ca paripālayet //

30. lokasya sīmantakarī maryādā lokabhāvanī /
samyaṅ nītā daṇḍanītir yathā mātā yathā pitā //

31. yasyāṃ bhavanti bhūtāni tad viddhi bharatarṣabha /
eṣa eva paro dharmo yad rājā daṇḍanītimān //

32. tasmāt kauravya dharmeṇa prajāḥ pālaya nītimān /
evaṃ vṛttaḥ prajā rakṣan svargaṃ jetāsi durjayam //

Notes

[1] More literally, this verse would read: "Concerning the combination of punitive justice and the king, tell me grandfather, what are the accomplishments according to how [the king] acts?"

[2] This verse is the same as 5.130.13, with the exception of *svadharmebhyaḥ*, which in Book 5 is replaced by *svadharmeṇa*. I take the ablative case here to have the same force as the instrumental in 5.130.13; therefore: "according to their respective dharmas."

[3] "Perform their own duties," this is surely the meaning, although the sense of *some* is obscure; it literally reads: "make the effort in Soma," *some prayatnaṃ kurvanti*.

[4] Verses 6 and 7 are the same as 5.130.15,14, respectively.

[5] The phrase "The earth yields crops without being tilled," *akṛṣṭapacyā pṛthivī*, seems to be a formula for describing a prosperous and dharmic kingdom or time, with no necessary connection to the framework of the yugas. See 12.29.18, 132; 12.216.16; and 12.255.12. It is only used in Book 12.

[6] "Misfortune," *aśubha*; the word could also be translated as "inauspiciousness," or "evil." It should be understood as an equivalent of a-dharma.

[7] This is probably the meaning of the second half of this verse, when seen in contrast to the first half of verse 12.

[8] Verses 25 and 26 are the same as 5.130.16–17 (first two thirds of 17, which has 3 lines). The first half of verse 27 is the same as the last third of 5.130.17. The first half of verse 28 is equal to the first half of 5.130.18.

[9] 5.130.14 reads *daṇḍanītyāṃ* instead of *daṇḍanītyā*.

[10] 5.130.17 reads *kāraṇād* instead of *karaṇād*, both times.

Appendix E

Bhīṣma's Kṛta-like Regency

Mahābhārata 1.102.1–14

Probably the best illustration of how the Kṛta Yuga was used by
the Epic poets as a metaphor to describe an ideal kingdom is the
portrayal of the kingdom of Kurukṣetra after the birth of
Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura; during the time when Bhīṣma
was regent.[1] In the middle of its depiction of the prosperous and
dharmic nature of the kingdom, the text states that "even in the
provinces of the kingdom it was the Kṛta Yuga,"[2] the implication
being that the Kṛta-like conditions that prevailed in the city also
reached the farthest areas of the realm. It is clear that no univer-
sal cosmic cycle is intended here.

Vaiśaṃpāyana says to King Janamejaya:

1. When those three princes (Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura)
had been born, these [other] three prospered: the jungle of the
Kurus, the Kurus themselves, and the land of the Kurus.

2. The earth gave tall and fruitful crops. Parjanya rained in sea-
son, and trees had many flowers and fruits.

3. Draught animals were overjoyed, deer and birds delighted;
flowers were fragrant, and fruits were juicy.

4. The cities were filled with merchants and artisans. [People]
were brave, learned, virtuous and happy.

5. There were no thieves,[3] and people were not attracted to a-dharma. Even in the provinces of the kingdom it was the Kṛta Yuga.[4]

6. The people were prosperous then. They practiced giving (*dāna*), ritual action, and dharma; they were bound in mutual affection, and they were devoted to sacrifices and vows.

7. People were free from arrogance and anger, they shunned greed, and they nurtured each other. Dharma was supreme.

8. That city (Hāstinapura) was like a brimming ocean. It was full of gateways, arches, and turrets resembling gathering clouds; crowded with a hundred palaces, it was resplendent like the city of the great Indra.

9. The people were happy and they enjoyed themselves in rivers, forests, lakes, and ponds; on mountain tops, and in beautiful groves.

10. At that time, the Southern Kurus rivaled the Northern Kurus and they walked among siddhas, *ṛṣis*, and bards. No one was poor, and there were no widows.

11. In the beautiful countryside, your majesty, which was protected on all sides by Bhīṣma in accordance with the Śāstras, the Kurus made many wells, groves, resting places, assembly halls, and lodgings for *brāhmaṇas*.

12. The country was beautiful, and it was marked by hundreds of shrines and sacrificial posts. Seizing other kingdoms, Bhīṣma increased the land, as the wheel of dharma rolled on.

13. As the noble princes performed their tasks, the city and the countryside were in a continually festive state.

14. In the houses of the foremost Kurus and in those of the citizens, oh king, the words 'we must give' and 'here, eat' were heard everywhere.

Sanskrit Text

1. teṣu triṣu kumāreṣu jāteṣu kurujāṅgalam /
kuravo 'tha kurukṣetraṃ trayam etad avardhata //

2. ūrdhvasasyābhavad bhūmiḥ sasyāni phalavanti ca /
yathartuvarṣī parjanyo bahupuṣpaphalā drumāḥ //

3. vāhanāni prahṛṣṭāni muditā mṛgapakṣiṇaḥ /
gandhavanti ca mālyāni rasavanti phalāni ca //

4. vaṇigbhiś cāvakīryanta nagarāny atha śilpibhiḥ /
śūrāś ca kṛtavidyāś ca santaś ca sukhino 'bhavan //

5. nābhavan dasyavaḥ kecin nādharmarucayo janāḥ /
pradeśeṣv api rāṣṭrāṇāṃ kṛtaṃ yugam avartata //

6. dānakriyādharmaśīlā yajñavrataparāyaṇāḥ /
anyonyaprītisaṃyuktā vyavardhanta prajās tadā //

7. mānakrodhavihīnāś ca janā lobhavivarjitāḥ /
anyonyam abhyavardhanta dharmottaram avartata //

8. tan mahodadhivat pūrṇaṃ nagaraṃ vai vyarocata /
dvāratoraṇaniryūhair yuktam abhracayopamaiḥ /
prāsādaśatasambādhaṃ mahendrapurasaṃnibham //

9. nadīṣu vanakhaṇḍeṣu vāpīpalvalasānuṣu /
kānaneṣu ca ramyeṣu vijahrur muditā janāḥ //

10. uttaraiḥ kurubhiḥ sārdhaṃ dakṣiṇāḥ kuravas tadā /
vispardhamānā vyacaraṃs tathā siddharṣicāraṇaiḥ /
nābhavat kṛpaṇaḥ kaścin nābhavan vidhavāḥ striyaḥ //

11. tasmiñ janapade ramye bahavaḥ kurubhiḥ kṛtāḥ /
kūpārāmasabhāvāpyo brāhmaṇāvasathās tathā /
bhīṣmeṇa śāstrato rājan sarvataḥ parirakṣite //

12. babhūva ramaṇīyaś ca caityayūpaśatāṅkitaḥ /
sa deśaḥ pararāṣṭrāṇi pratigṛhyābhivardhitaḥ /
bhīṣmeṇa vihitaṃ rāṣṭre dharmacakram avartata //

13. kriyāmāneṣu kṛtyeṣu kumārāṇāṃ mahātmanām /
paurajānapadāḥ sarve babhūvuḥ satatotsavāḥ //

14. gṛheṣu kurumukhyānāṃ paurāṇāṃ ca narādhipa /
dīyatāṃ bhujyatāṃ ceti vāco 'śrūyanta sarvaśaḥ //

Notes

[1] For another, similar use of the metaphor see the depiction of the peace-

ful coexistence of the social classes after Rāma Jāmadagnya had killed
off the *kṣatriyas* 21 times (1.58.4–24). The last of these verses reads:
"So, as the Kṛta Yuga was in full sway, King, the whole earth was
completely filled with living beings," *evaṃ kṛtayuge samyag vartamāne
tadā nṛpa / āpūryata mahī kṛtsnā prāṇibhir bahubhir bhṛśam //*

[2] See below, verse 5.

[3] Literally, "there were no *dasyus*." A *dasyu* can either be a thief, some-
one who neglects the rites accepted by society, or a demon. The con-
text seems to favor the first of these meanings.

[4] Or "the Kṛta Yuga reached even the outlying areas of the kingdom."

Appendix F

Bhaktivedanta Swami and the 'Golden Age' within the Kali Yuga

The *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* describes how the goddesses Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Gaṅgā once quarreled with each other. Sarasvatī cursed Gaṅgā and Lakṣmī, prompting Gaṅgā to then curse Sarasvatī in return. Hari (Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa) established that, as a result of these curses, Lakṣmī and Gaṅgā should become rivers and remain on Earth (i.e. India) for the first 5,000 years of the Kali Yuga, even though Kṛṣṇa himself would leave the world at the beginning of the dark age.[1] However, Hari would still be present in the world for the first 10,000 years of Kali through different manifestations and, especially, through his devoted followers.[2]

Towards the end of the Purāṇa, just as Kṛṣṇa is about to leave the Earth and the Kali Yuga arrives, the following conversation between Gaṅgā and Kṛṣṇa sums up the main ideas:

Bhāgīrathī (Gaṅgā) said:

> 49. O Lord, supreme lover, you are [now] going to the great *goloka*! What will become of us in the Kali Yuga?

The Lord (Kṛṣṇa) said:

> 50-51. Remain on Earth for [the first] 5,000 years of the Kali [Yuga]! The sins that the sinful give you through bathing will be instantly reduced to ashes when the followers of my teach-

ings/mantra (*mantropāsaka*) touch or see [you], or bathe [in your waters], O Jāhnavī!

52. Go to wherever Hari's names and the Purāṇas are [recited], and listen attentively together with the [other] rivers.

53. By listening to the Purāṇas, and through the recitation of Hari's names, sins like the killing of a *brāhmaṇa* will be reduced to ashes.

54. And they will also be reduced to ashes simply by the embrace of a Vaiṣṇava, just as fire burns dry sticks.

55. Likewise, Vaiṣṇavas [will reduce to ashes] the sins of sinners in the world. Those holy bathing places (*tīrthas*) on Earth, O Jāhnavī,

56. are always in the pure bodies of my devotees! The Earth is instantly made pure by the dust on the feet of my devotees,

57. as are *tīrthas* and the world itself. Those *brāhmaṇas* who, following my teachings/mantra, eat the remains of food offered to me,

58. and always meditate on me alone, they are dearer to me than my life. By merely touching them, wind and fire are purified.

59. My devotees will remain on Earth for 10,000 [years] of the Kali [Yuga]. When they are gone, [people] will be of one *varṇa*.

60. Devoid of my devotees, the Earth will be seized by Kali...[3]

The meaning of these verses seems straightforward. As the Kali Yuga arrives, Kṛṣṇa departs for his heavenly world, *goloka*, and comforts Gaṅgā who, due to the curse, must remain for another 5,000 years. He explains that all the sins she receives from bathers will be removed by the mere presence of worthy Vaiṣṇavas, who will, themselves, be on Earth for 10,000 years. Although not stated explicitly here, the other passages referred to above indicate that the first five of these 10,000 years are meant to run concurrently with Gaṅgā's 5,000 years.

This passage, and indeed the Purāṇa as a whole, is an interesting sectarian elaboration that seems intended to bolster the

status of the Bengali Vaiṣṇava movement, especially the tradition started by Caitanya in the 16th century.[4] The passage is also, in a sense, an updated and modified version of the claims made centuries earlier in the *Mahābhārata* to the effect that whenever there were enough followers of Nārāyaṇa the Kṛta Yuga would start.[5] The important difference here, however, is that instead of claiming that a new Kṛta Yuga will begin, it is within the Kali Yuga that the devout followers will create special circumstances, a special period. By the time of the Purāṇa's composition the encroaching presence of the Kali Yuga was an acknowledged fact of Purāṇic and Śāstric tradition, so it could hardly be denied, but the text implies that it could be delayed by the presence of 'true' Vaiṣṇavas.

But it is the recent use of this idea that concerns us here. In a recent publication, Mahānidhi Swami, a disciple of Bhaktivedanta Swami,[6] purports to be quoting from the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* when he gives the translation of a passage very similar to this one, with the important difference that the beginning of Kṛṣṇa's reply reads: "After 5,000 years My *mantra upāsaka* [worshipper of the holy name] will appear in this world and spread the chanting of the holy name everywhere. Not only in India, but all over the world people will chant *Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare Hare Rāma Hare Rāma Rāma Rāma Hare Hare*!" And a few verses later: "This period of worldwide chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa will continue for 10,000 years."[7]

These verses are given as proof that Kṛṣṇa himself had predicted Bhaktivedanta Swami's birth and his world-wide dissemination of Caitanya/Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, and we are told that he inaugurated the 10,000 year golden period within our Kali Yuga described by the Purāṇa.[8] Unfortunately, no exact reference is provided, but there seems to be little doubt that the verses meant are the ones translated above.[9] Mahānidhi Swami's translation is then enthusiastically quoted verbatim in another publication.[10]

Further evidence of this willingness to proclaim the beginning of a golden age—even in the midst of the dark Kali Yuga—is the title of a book by yet another disciple of Bhaktivedanta Swami,

Atma Tattva Dasa. It is significantly called *Shrila Prabhupada: Acharya for the Golden Age.*[11] The title is reminiscent of a work authored by one S. P. Kaur, and published in 1972 under the patronage of Yogi Bhajan, the founder of a Sikh movement in the West during the sixties: the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO). In an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of the astrological ages, this other book was called *Guru for the Aquarian Age; the Life and Teachings of Guru Nanak.* In the introduction, Yogi Bhajan mentions the present dark Kali Yuga, but hails the imminent dawning of the astrological age of Aquarius as the arrival of a golden age, and states that Nānak is "the teacher for this glorious age of the brotherhood of man."[12] However, he does not state clearly whether he views the emerging Aquarian age as a golden sub-period within the Kali Yuga,[13] or as synonymous with a new Satya Yuga.[14]

Notes

[1] For the story, see *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* 2.6–7. Lakṣmī's 5,000 years are mentioned at 2.6.89 and 2.7.10; Gaṅgā's at 2.10.67 and 2.11.1, as well as in the passage quoted below.

[2] *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* 2.7.12; 4.90.32–33.

[3] *bhāgīrathy uvāca | 49. he nātha ramaṇaśreṣṭha yāsi golokam uttamam / asmākaṃ kā gatiś cātra bhaviṣyati kalau yuge // śrībhagavān uvāca | 50. kaleḥ pañcasahasrāṇi varṣāṇi tiṣṭha bhūtale / pāpāni pāpino yāni tubhyaṃ dāsyanti snānataḥ // 51. manmantropāsakasparśād bhasmībhūtāni tatkṣaṇāt / bhaviṣyanti darśanāc ca snānād eva hi jāhvavi (sic) // 52. harer nāmāni yatraiva purāṇāni bhavanti hi / tatra gatvā sāvadhānam ābhiḥ sārdhaṃ ca śroṣyasi // 53. purāṇaśravaṇāc caiva harer nāmānukīrtanāt / bhasmībhūtāni pāpāni brahmahatyādikāni ca // 54. bhasmībhūtāni tāny eva vaiṣṇavāliṅganena ca / tṛṇāni śuṣkakāṣṭhāni dahanti pāvakā yathā // 55. tathā 'pi vaiṣṇavā loke pāpāni pāpinām api / pṛthivyāṃ yāni tīrthāni puṇyāny api ca jāhnavi // 56. madbhaktānāṃ śarīreṣu santi pūteṣu saṃtatam / madbhaktapādarajasā sadyaḥ pūtā vasuṃdharā // 57. sadyaḥ pūtāni tīrthāni sadyaḥ pūtaṃ jagat tathā / manmantropāsakā viprā ye maducchiṣṭabhojinaḥ // 58. mām eva nityaṃ dhyāyante te matprāṇādhikāḥ priyāḥ / tadupasparśamātreṇa pūto vāyuś ca pāvakaḥ // 59. kaler daśasahasrāṇi madbhaktāḥ santi bhūtale / ekavarṇā bhaviṣyanti madbhakteṣu gateṣu ca // 60.*

madbhaktaśūnyā pṛthivī kaligrastā bhaviṣyati / Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa 4.129.49–60. The numbering appears to be off by half a verse.

⁴ Although the Purāṇa contains a few sections that could be as early as the 8th century, its present form is considered by Hazra ([1975] 1987:166) to date from the 16th century, after thorough transformations—since the 10th century—at the hands of Bengali Vaiṣṇavas. See also Brown 1974:37, 205; and L. Rocher 1986:163.

⁵ See above, Chapter 4, note 43.

⁶ Bhaktivedanta Swami is the founder of the well-known International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the so-called Hare Krishna movement.

⁷ Mahānidhi Swami 1996:279–280. The brackets are the Swami's. He elsewhere (p. 45) gives other intriguing quotes purportedly taken from Purāṇas like the *Vāyu* but, as in the case of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* quotes, no references are provided.

⁸ Mahānidhi Swami 1996:281; Dasa and Dasa 1996:18. The traditional date for the start of the Kali Yuga being 3102 B.C.E., the 5,000 year mark would have to fall in 1898 C.E. Bhaktivedanta Swami was born in 1896 (Dasa and Dasa 1996:10).

⁹ This appears to be the understanding of another devotee who has posted, and correctly identified, the verses along with a somewhat accurate translation on the World Wide Web. For his translation see: http://www.crl.com/~nparker/bv.htm; viewed on 7/15/97.

¹⁰ Dasa and Dasa 1996:17.

¹¹ As announced on a flyer posted on the halls of the University of California, Berkeley, in November of 1995. I have not been able to obtain a copy of this book which, apparently, has not even been published. Shrila Prabhupada is Bhaktivedanta Swami.

¹² Yogi Bhajan, in Kaur 1972:5–6.

¹³ For the followers of Kalki Bhagavan (see above, chapter 6, note 122) the age of Aquarius is a small age within the new golden age. See http://www.concentric.net/~Kalki/World/Branch1/QuestionsStatic/qa34.htm.

¹⁴ Both movements, ISKCON and 3HO, are modern-day representatives of traditions that emerged approximately 500 years ago. Caitanya and Nānak, the respective founders of these traditions, were near contemporaries, and both taught that meditation on their version of the divine name was the best way to liberation in the Kali Yuga.

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